CALIFORNIA ASSEMBLAGE ART: GORDON WAGNER

Interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith

VOLUME II

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Piece of Pieces from The Sea, 1958, photograph by Janice Felgar.

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TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE

FEBRUARY 7, 1987

SMITH: I thought today, Gordon, we would resume the chronology of your life. When we left off with that, we were in Topanga; you had moved to Topanga, back from Arizona in the mid-1950s. So my first question is what led you to return to Southern California from Arizona?

WAGNER: Well, I had a problem there of survival. Arizona is a wonderful place, especially an Indian reservation, but when you run out of money, there's not much you can do but come back to where you were. I didn't want to go back to Hermosa Beach, I wanted to get away from that area for a while. I owned the house there, rented that to people. And I said, well, what would be a good compromise between the sea and Arizona, where I could get the terrain of nature and mountains, and yet be close to the sea so I could go swimming and bodysurfing if I wanted to? And something flashed on me: Topanga Canyon. At that time, there were a group of artists living there, and rent was so cheap it was incredible. The first house we lived in was about five bedrooms and a huge living room and studio, and it was, I think, $57.50 a month rent. I stayed there until the landlord dynamited a big rock in front of the place, and kind of changed the geographic position of the house, his house and all the rest of the houses in the

neighborhood. Yeah, that was on Fernwood Pacific [Drive]. A guy named Vance Sanders. He meant well. He did scare the people a bit. So in sheer desperation-- I didn't know what to do, and this wonderful woman who lived about three blocks away said, "I have a house for rent up on the top of the hill with a view that you just won't believe." And she said, "It's such a beautiful house, and an acre with gardens all landscaped, I'd have to charge you $90 a month rent for it." So I moved up there after a year of the other place.

SMITH: Is that the house that didn't have any water?

WAGNER: No, that's another one. That was after the one on Summit [Drive]. There I met a lot of wonderful people. I got very stimulated by Topanga and by the artists who lived there. That's where I met Karl Nolde, the German expressionist. He lived across the road from me.

SMITH: Nole or Nolde?

WAGNER: Nolde.

SMITH: Is he any relation to Emil Nolde?

WAGNER: Yeah, he was the brother of Emil Nolde. But he called himself Kanol in America, Karl Kanol, of Karl Nol of Nolde. He kept you laughing from night to day, wonderful German. I could go on with stories about him for years. Incredible what he got into, just living in Topanga.

SMITH: Well, maybe you could just give us one of the

stories about Karl Nolde?

WAGNER: Well, I wouldn't know where to start with that, because he was always having-- He was a painter who painted German expressionist painting. He still is a German expressionist, and he is still painting, but now he lives in Mexico in Guanajuato. He's lived there since about 1957. He liked to buy old automobiles. He had sort of an obsession for old vehicles in the thirties: '37, '36 models, '35, '32.

One story I can tell you, he also painted houses to make a living. But his house was stacked with paintings, and he hung paintings on top of paintings in the house. He lived next door to a woman who kept monkeys, who had a monkey farm up the canyon, a Mrs. Buckman. He lived next door to her. The monkey-farm lady had about three hundred monkeys. She would dress up the most wonderful monkeys in clothes, all sorts of suits and neckties and shirts, and bring them down to the market in Topanga in a group. They'd go into the store and drive the storekeeper crazy, and the butcher, they'd be up on the butcher's counter. The whole monkey farm burned down one day. Two monkeys got in a fight over a cigarette and a match and set fire to the hay. Burned the whole place down before they could do anything. She lost about, oh, 50 percent of her animals The fire department tried to hook up the water, but the

bigger monkeys were unhooking it all the time. They were up on the fire truck putting the hats on. Like the chimps--

SMITH: Did the monkeys escape?

WAGNER: Yeah, well, they were all out of their cages running around wild. The fire department was so frustrated-- Actually, when they went back after the fire was over, down to the station in Topanga-- Bob Etts, he was my friend, he told me the story. When they got back they were all talking about the crazy fire and all these crazy animals. They went out, and there were two monkeys that were unrolling the hose out of the fire truck at the fire station. [laughter]

Well, Karl became a neighbor of Mrs. Buckman, who slept with an ape and had a donkey that was always right in the middle of the road. In order to make an entrance into my house and Karl's-- And Hazelett lived up there, he had the Hound of the Baskerville. It was a big dog he'd named something or other. He had these huge hounds. The three entries where it was very steep, at night we'd come home at one, two in the morning, the donkey would be lying across the road. We'd have to get out and sit on a steep angle and pull this animal off the road to get by him, he wouldn't move. We told Mrs. Buckman about it a hundred times; it didn't do any good.

Karl was always painting, but he left his window open. One night there was a knock at the door, and there was a monkey, or two monkeys, dressed up in Lederhosen. He opened the door and they both jumped up on him and hugged him while the other monkeys came through the back window. They were throwing his brushes all over the studio, you know. Karl was going mad with these monkeys. So that was a typical Topanga story.

As for his cars, that's a whole different thing--that goes on and on and on. The things caught on fire, and he was arrested. He drove one car to Santa Monica down on the Pacific Coast Highway near the overpass, the Wilshire overpass. It ran out of gas. So he went to get gasoline, and he came back and the car was gone; somebody had stolen it. So he went to the Santa Monica City Hall, told the police, reported it. He hitchhiked back to Topanga, and then he got his other car. He drove that down, and that broke down in the middle of the highway. He went for help at a gas station, came back and that one was stolen. He went to the city hall again, and they refused to accept his complaints. They said he was crazy and threw him in jail. [laughter] So he finally got out after he convinced them that he was not crazy, and he really did have two cars, and they were both stolen on the same day within four hours of each other. He went home and got his old truck.

He had to paint some house in the [San Fernando] Valley, and he's going down the hill, and he got down there and this woman stopped dead in front of him and slammed on the brakes, and he rear-ended her. Well, when he did that, all of the paint in the truck tipped over, and the lids came off and it started running all over the floor--green, white paints, mixed. The policeman screamed at Karl to get out of the truck. And he said, [with German accent] "I can't get out of the truck, I'm stuck."

And he said, "What do you mean you're stuck?"

"Well, I'll tell you."

"I'll pull you out." So he opened the door to pull Karl out, and when he did that all the paint ran out all over the policeman's pants and boots, completely down over his feet and legs. So Karl was again taken in that day, in Van Nuys.

He had these things happen to him. One car caught on fire on the Pacific Coast Highway, in the back seat, and he had nothing to do, so he kept running over across the traffic getting sand in his hands to pour on it, to put out the fire. [laughter] Back and forth.

Karl's eighty-two now. When he was seventy-nine, they had the Cervantes Festival in Mexico, in Guanajuato. Karl walked up to the conductor, the conductor of the Leipzig Symphony Orchestra. They played Mahler, and when they got

all through, he said, "You know, Mahler was my hero, and Bruno Walter was my hero."

And the man said, "Who are you?"

"Well, I lived in Leipzig, my name is Karl Nolde."

"Karl Nolde. Where have you been?"

He says, "Why do you ask?"

He said, "We've been looking for you for years, you've been lost."

He said, "How do you mean that?"

He said, "Half of our museum is full of your work. I'll send you a catalog." So they sent him a catalog this thick, and just about half of the book was his paintings, his works. So they invited him to have a retrospective on his eightieth birthday of all that work and his new works. So he went to Leipzig to celebrate that. I had him for a neighbor and all other kinds of eccentrically wonderful people for neighbors. Topanga was a place where you didn't expect anybody to come in it, and the people who lived there, you didn't expect would ever leave.

SMITH: Was Topanga more isolated then? Was it harder to get in and out from the highway?

WAGNER: No. It was for a while, because they cut the highway off, took one mile out of the curves, and you couldn't go to the coast at all. It was all shut up from the coast up to Topanga, to remove these curves. So if we

came home before two in the morning-- They'd let natives through on this dirt road, but no one else. If you came home after two in the morning, it was locked up and you had to walk home. I remember those icy cold nights going up that canyon, and the full moon. It was a beautiful thing to see, and it was like walking on the moon. You'd have to walk all the way home.

SMITH: At this time, you were working at Rocketdyne in Canoga Park?

WAGNER: Rocketdyne? No, not at that time, I wasn't. I was just painting. I wasn't working right at that moment, no. It was a little later I took a job in Santa Monica, at the Steven Douglas Company. I worked on the plotting table for a jet simulator, a jet-fighting FJ-1 simulator, for pilots in plotting the curves. I worked on the first plotting table like that to get all these curves related to the flight situation and developed all this as a machine to do it. It was purchased by Benson Lehner later. The original concept, the actual electronics, were worked out by a man from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and I was doing the electromechanical design for it, to make it work. He had the theories of how it might do it, so there were two of us working on this device.

Then I took time off for Mexico and went there for a while. I came back and moved up on a mountain where I

purchased a house for $10,000 with a living room that was fifty feet by forty and a twenty-seven-foot ceiling. That was Charlie Chaplin's house at one time. And Payne--what was his name--Robert Payne? The poet. He lived there before me. It was three acres and no water. That was the place that was waterless.

SMITH: You had a well or something?

WAGNER: No, nothing. Water tank. Had to supply the water through the water tank. It was supposed to come up from the bottom of the canyon. The Topanga Oaks Mutual Water Company supplied the water, but by the time it went through about thirty houses down below, it never reached my tank. I had to go and get water and haul it back up there. I built a water tank on a trailer, and I'd go down to Santa Monica on a Friday night to Zucky's and have my coffee; usually take Karl along, or somebody, John Raymond or [Arnold] Schiffrin or somebody. We'd go spend about two hours in there while my water tank was filling up in the service station across the street. You know, I'd stick it in, and I knew about the time it was filled. It was five hundred gallons; truck it up there, and it was good for about a week.

SMITH: I'd like to ask you a little bit about some of the places in Los Angeles and Southern California where you were exhibiting at the time. Did you have shows at Von's

[Café Galleria] coffeehouse?

WAGNER: Yes, I did. Ed [Edward] Kienholz got that show for me, following him. I met him in Topanga when he came to visit me.

SMITH: He lived there at the time?

WAGNER: He was having a show at Von's. No, he lived down in L.A.; he lived on Melrose Avenue, I think it was.

SMITH: At the time, yeah.

WAGNER: Near Melrose in an old house, a roofless house. I was introduced to him through Arnold Wagman, who was a New York character, a true man from the Lower East Side, you know, and a funny guy, a wonderful wit. Anyway, Von gave me the exhibition right after Ed Kienholz, and I think the next show after that was Hans Burkhardt.

SMITH: In terms of the shows that Von had, what was he, as far as you know, what was he concerned about doing with these shows? Was it very open, was he trying to show a lot of different types of work, or did he have pretty specific criteria?

WAGNER: I don't think Von much worried about anything like that. He was a very happy man that ran an espresso bar and coffeehouse, and good quality food. What his basic interest was was to have fairly good quality art hanging on his walls as decoration, you know. I think that's what he was basically into, but it was a good place, because a lot

of people came there at that time. It was the time of the coffeehouses, when things were getting going. He was probably one of the first.

SMITH: What about Syndell [Studios] gallery, Walter Hopps's first gallery, did you exhibit there?

WAGNER: No, no, I never exhibited at Syndell. That was before-- Ed Kienholz did have an exhibition at Syndell. There were people there like Bob [Robert] Irwin, and Craig Kauffman, and, oh, the San Francisco artist who was the big artist, you know.

SMITH: Hassel Smith?

WAGNER: Hassel Smith, he was there, yeah. Wally [Wallace] Hedrick, and just a few. Wally [Wallace] Berman.

Walter put on the Merry-Go-Round Show, which was in the Santa Monica merry-go-round building, where he had a lot of these kind of pieces, you know, from his gallery. It was a really exciting show. I remember there was one painting that had--a big black painting with a hole in it, just punched through. There was a weightlifter from Muscle Beach, and he was standing there, and he was so angry, he used to come in every day and bend a one-inch bar of steel double like this to vent his fury about the piece.

Syndell was on Gorham Avenue, right off of San Vicente [Boulevard] and--

SMITH: Barrington [Avenue], right?

WAGNER: Barrington, where the intersection is. It was a redwood building that was made out of logs. It actually was a real estate office at one time. A very nice juxtaposition, because here was the Syndell gallery, with Walter, and then there was Robert Mallory--on the end was Nellie Trout, who was a little old lady who had life-drawing classes for menopause-type women, real pretty paintings, and the Syndell on the other end of the building. It was an interesting juxtaposition. [laughter] Entirely opposite.

SMITH: What about Exodus Gallery? Did you ever exhibit there?

WAGNER: Not really, no. No. I went to performances there. You're talking about Connor Everts's gallery in San Pedro.

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: I showed a couple of things there, but never had a big show; you know, things. It was a wonderful place.

SMITH: In terms of the artistic community that exists in San Pedro now with Angel's Gate [Cultural Center] and the artists who are living there now, was the Exodus Gallery an important thing in terms of attracting artists to the area? How important was it in terms of what has developed in San Pedro?

WAGNER: I would say that 99 percent of the people in San

Pedro never heard of the Exodus Gallery.

SMITH: Even the artists?

WAGNER: Well, there weren't any artists in San Pedro. They didn't exist. The reason I think that Connor Everts opened the Exodus Gallery was that it was a funky neighborhood. It was right off of Beacon Street, which was the center of San Pedro, with all its bars and the red-light district. It was funky; it was where it was supposed to be. It was like a beat coffeehouse, but it was elegantly put together by Connor, who's always been a master at building and designing. He had performances and happenings and all these sorts of things, and everybody came there, but I don't think anybody from San Pedro ever would even bother to look in the place. I think the reason that Connor got there was because Connor was a longshoreman, and he worked unloading banana boats in the old days when they did it by hand without the containers. I think it was a convenient place for him to have a coffeehouse, being in San Pedro where he worked. He was married to the Nisei Queen [Chizuko Everts] at that time. She was the most-- You know, in Little Tokyo they have every year the Nisei Week? She won that. She was a beautiful Japanese girl. At that time, Connor was doing all sorts of fantastic pieces of art. He was a good draftsman, and he had a wonderful sense of humor. He still

has a wonderful sense of humor. The last time I saw him, he said, "Gordon, if you don't have a show by the time you're fifteen years old, you just ain't going to make it." A retrospective, he said.

SMITH: Now, the Ferus Gallery, did you ever exhibit your work in the Ferus?

WAGNER: Yeah, a little bit. Ed Kienholz opened his own gallery, the Now Gallery, out on La Cienega [Boulevard]. He gave me my, actually, first show in Los Angeles in that area in his gallery. Right after that a sort of partnership came about because Walter moved from the Syndell to a gallery that was a warehouse in the back of an antique store [run by people] by the name of Streeter and Camille Blair. They gave them that whole space for the Ferus Gallery. So Ed took all his artists with him, and they kind of combined the two together for a while until Walter decided which ones he wanted and which ones he didn't want. Two different personalities and reasons, and so there were some eliminated and some stayed until they got what they wanted.

SMITH: Ed Kienholz, in his oral history, mentions that for a while the gallery was run--it was his and Walter's gallery, but it was run, in a way, collectively; the artists would discuss things until they arrived at a consensus. Is that how you saw it?

WAGNER: Yeah. Bob [Robert] Alexander had a big part in it, too.

SMITH: Did you participate in those discussions?

WAGNER: Oh, a few, yeah.

SMITH: Like what kinds of things-- Like whose work would be shown?

WAGNER: Yeah, that sort of thing, nothing major. When they closed down Wally Berman's show, for the cross with the sexual photograph of Shirley and Wally, the police shut that down. Bob Alexander was very big in the gallery then, you know, he was working. You know Baza [Bob Alexander], don't you? He's in Venice, he has the temple. I'm a member of that. [laughter] I'm an ordained minister, as a matter of fact, of that temple. Still have my license from the State of California. He invited me, and there were a lot of people like Berman and [George] Herms in his temple. He's still running it.

But he was important in that time, and he says, "Okay, guys, it's all over. We're being shut down." He came running into the-- "The fuzz are here to close down the gallery for Wally's show." And Kienholz, he was most of the time sitting in the lotus position working on his wood pieces, like the one behind you on the floor. At that time, Gil Henderson was pouring the paint all over the canvases. The guys worked in this gallery; they used it as

a studio. Gil was pouring all this paint all over the canvas, and then he'd take a stick or knife and scrape half the painting away, leaving it kind of tracked. Then he'd throw it up onto the roof of the Ferus Gallery and let it dry. Artie Richer was walking around making things out of torn roofing paper. And John Reed, he was building things out of paper and collage. John Reed always walked around, he wore a Greek sailor's hat, and he always said, "You know, an artist's work is never done." A lot of those people moved, like Dane Dixon. They all took off or died.

SMITH: Kienholz, in his oral history, mentions that, well, he mentions Henderson, in particular, moving to New York and then disappearing. He feels that if Henderson had stayed in Los Angeles he would have developed as a stronger artist.

WAGNER: Who?

SMITH: Kienholz said that in his oral history about Henderson, Gil Henderson.

WAGNER: Oh, Gil Henderson? Gil Henderson moved to New York, and he had a big show when he came back. He had a show in the-- What was it? I saw Gil Henderson at Kienholz's exhibit at the Dwan Gallery, and he was all dressed up in a suit and a necktie and a top coat. He looked like a millionaire. [laughter] I first knew Gil Henderson on the beach in Hermosa when he was married to

Olympia. They lived right about a block away from me. He spent quite a bit of time in Hermosa Beach. I think the last show he had was in Molly Barnes's gallery with Picture Frames. He worked in the framing company, and he had moldings this big, and cornices. They were coming out of the walls, and he put frames inside of frames. The whole thing was creeping all over the gallery, the picture frames as sculpture. It was a beautiful show, I loved it. Then in the middle of it, he'd put up a glass cover like that, and he'd write a note and ball it all up and throw it in there, and it would say something like--I forget the quote--why are kids so nasty, or something like that.

He worked for Art Services as a picture framer, you know, cutting molding. He stacked all his work up and said he was never going to show it again as long as he lived. And last I heard, he hasn't shown anywhere. I remember when he won the first award in the [Los Angeles] County Museum show back in I think about '51, '52, the Atavistic Image. He had a lot of talent, and [Lorser] Feitelson was really behind Gil Henderson. I like Gil Henderson. He was a calm guy, rather negative, but he was okay.

SMITH: What do you mean negative?

WAGNER: Bitter, I mean bitter.

SMITH: At this time, I'm talking about the mid-fifties, late fifties, was Irwin already discussing perceptual

theory, or was he as intellectual as he--

WAGNER: No, he was doing just kind of-- In the fifties he was making bone paintings, drawing bones and things like that.

SMITH: In terms of when he would be talking to other artists, was he very intellectual compared to--

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Super intellectual, yeah. He could talk pretty well when he wanted to. If he didn't want to sit down for an hour and meditate in a lecture. He'd do that sometimes, the class would wait for him to say something, he'd sit through the whole class in meditation and then he'd leave and not say a word.

SMITH: This is in the fifties already?

WAGNER: No, that was later. And he always refused to have any photographs of his work done or reproduced anyplace. I don't know if he's still doing that, but that was his-- "I'll never have anything reproduced."

SMITH: Well, a lot of his stuff doesn't work if you see it in a photograph.

WAGNER: Wouldn't reproduce anyway. It's pretty hard to reproduce a white painting, isn't it?

SMITH: Were there other galleries that you were showing at at this time?

WAGNER: Well, I had an exhibition in the Lucy Bayne Gallery, which was on Beverly [Boulevard], about Robertson

[Boulevard]. I had an exhibition there of my Navaho paintings. Lucy and Walter Bayne, they were Swedish.

SMITH: Was she interested in showing avant-garde work, or was she more commercially oriented?

WAGNER: I don't know. My paintings were totally abstract, I'd say that my **Yeibichai** [also known as **The Navaho Night Chant**] painting and the big one, those sort of-- In those days they weren't exactly what you would call conservative. She showed Leonard Kaplan and a lot of people like that. She was a nice lady, really. All she wanted was three paintings for an exhibition. Yeah, I had to give her three paintings to have an exhibition in the place. She didn't tell me that until the end.

SMITH: Oh, you had to give her the paintings?

WAGNER: Yeah. She didn't tell me that in the beginning, but I couldn't take three home. Then I was with another gallery there, it was called Foch Rayboff, Ernie Rayboff and Nina Foch.

SMITH: The actress?

WAGNER: Yeah. He just represented me. That was about three blocks from where the Lucy Bayne was at that time, on Beverly. I had exhibitions in different places, in Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach, Pacific Palisades. Different galleries. And with Silvan Simone. Before he was on Olympic [Boulevard] and Federal [Avenue] he was on Westwood

Boulevard just south of Wilshire [Boulevard]. He was there for about eight years, I guess, seven or eight years. He had some interesting artists at that time. He sold a lot of art for me, that's why I went with Simone. Two galleries really sold art for me: one was Silvan Simone and one in Manhattan Beach called the Hickson Gallery, Russ [Russell] Hickson. Those two, and Simone's gallery in the Palisades, which was called the Florentine, which was his gallery run by a German by the name of Edward Kneifel.

SMITH: Now, when you worked with Simone, let's say Simone and Hickson, was there any--did they try to influence your work at all? Did they say, "This is nice, but maybe you should do more of this?"

WAGNER: No, never. Never once.

SMITH: You brought in what you did and--

WAGNER: Well, after my Indian period and I'd sold all those paintings, I couldn't keep painting those, so I started moving into my assemblage. He was so good, he'd take a chance on things. He was a pioneer type. He told the collectors, he said, "Well, this is a show I'll lose money on, but I'm going to give it to Gordon anyway, because I have to show a loss once in a while." That's the kind of guy-- But if I had a show, he'd talk the people into it, and they'd buy the works regardless.

SMITH: Now, take Hickson in Manhattan Beach, what kind of

work did he generally show? Were you typical of the kind of work he was showing or were you kind of on the extreme side of things?

WAGNER: Well, he showed a lot of different kinds of artists: James Jarvaise, Francis De Erdely, Rico Lebrun and Henry Miller. A lot of people you don't know. He showed my old instructor, Norman [S.] Chamberlain, and people like that. Keith Crown, and people like Dave Miller and Frank Jensen and Ben Shaw. He had a nice group. No, my work wasn't far out at all. He was a very open person. He didn't sell junk. He didn't sell pretty paintings and pictures. No, that's why I liked him.

SMITH: Did you participate in the the Monday night walks on La Cienega?

WAGNER: Yeah, I used to go and see them walk around, check them out. I had a gallery there. At that time was probably, when, in the sixties?

SMITH: Fifties, sixties, yeah.

WAGNER: Well, the late fifties, early sixties. My gallery then was Bob [Robert] Comara [Gallery] right there, Melrose Place, back of [Felix] Landau [Gallery]. Oh, yeah. I had three or four shows in his place.

SMITH: Now, did gallery owners seek you out, or did you have to go knock on doors? How did that work? How did it happen that-- How did representation happen?

WAGNER: How was I asked, you mean?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: They asked me. I never knocked on any gallery door in my life, except in Europe. But never in America. I still won't. I don't really believe in it.

SMITH: Now, Simone--

WAGNER: I've tried two recently, just to see what would happen, and I'm certainly glad I tried it because I realized I would never want to do it again, you know.

SMITH: Who are these?

WAGNER: Well, Jan Baum was one of them.

SMITH: Here in Los Angeles?

WAGNER: Yeah. She handled Bruce Houston and a lot of people, Betye Saar and Alison Saar. I figured, well, she might be interested. She wasn't the slightest bit interested in my work and didn't even know anything about my work, you know.

SMITH: Did she look at any of the slides?

WAGNER: Oh, she looked at them, but she said, "Well, there's really no-- I have no space for you, and time--" She really turned me off.

SMITH: What was the other one?

WAGNER: Who was it, now? Oh, Asher Faure. I was asked to go there by Janice Felgar, the photographer. Somebody that worked at Asher Fauer loved my work. I was in an

exhibition at the Design Center, so they said, "Please come and show this to Betty Asher."

So I walked in. I was looking at Michael [C.] McMillen's show that time. Betty Asher came out and she was just-- She wasn't interested in talking to me. "She says, "Hello, Gordon, how are you?" That's all. She knew my name and who I was. Virginia [Copeland Wagner] said, "Would you like to see some of Gordon's work and slides?" She said, "I'm not the slightest bit interested, I know what he does." [laughter] Then Michael McMillen walks in, "Hi, Gordon, how are you?" and she disappeared into her room.

SMITH: Yeah. At the time when you--

WAGNER: That was enough. I don't need that. Before, I'd never asked a gallery for an exhibition in all my life, and I'm not about to do it again. That's it. No more.

SMITH: Was there any question of being exclusively represented by one--like Simone didn't mind that you were also represented by Comara and Hickson?

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WAGNER: Actually, when I was with [Silvan] Simone, I was with him from 1953 until about 1968. Then I went to Comara, and I wasn't represented by Simone anymore. I went to Comara, and I was with him from about '68, I guess, to about '74. I found Comara to be a very negative guy. I liked him, but he was negative, and he was always down. Somebody would want to buy something from me in there, and he'd say, "Well, there's something over here I think you'd like better." He talked the Sara Lee pies man out of buying a piece, you know, the big collector in Chicago. His daughter is a friend of mine from Eugene [Oregon]. He wanted it, and he saw the photograph in the brochure and wanted to know the price, and [Comara] didn't even bother to-- And then he told Simone how business was, how terrible it was. He really disliked Simone because Simone was so positive. He threw Simone out of his gallery because he was saying how his art was selling and how he was doing such a great job. Couldn't stand it; Comara couldn't take that. Comara had some good artists, don't get me wrong. He had a good eye. But when it came to selling and getting into it, there was something lacking in his personality that blocked. His wife was tremendous when she was alive, but she died. She ran the thing; she was the

salesperson. But I like Bob. I don't know whatever happened to him; he just dropped out.

So anyway, I wanted to have a show of these boxes of mine in 1975, so I went to Simone and told him that I'd made a mistake and thought I'd like to come back to him. "No way! I'm not going to let you come back to my gallery ever," he told me.

I said, "I've got all these new boxes. I'm sorry, I made a mistake with Comara. How many times I have to tell you I'm sorry? I made a mistake."

"I'm not going to take you back. I'll come and see what you're doing, but I'm not going to take you back."

So he came down to Echo Park, and he looked over all the works. I'd been married to Virginia, you know, and he'd never met Virginia, really. So he got to talk to her, and he weakened. I had a nice hound dog type, and he loves hound dogs, hunting hounds, you know. And he weakened, "Let me see what you've got." We go downstairs. He says, "It's fantastic, but as long as you are with me, if you ever change again, you are never going to come back".

I said, "Silvan, I was with you for ten years, or nine years, and I was always there, right? But you got me mad at you because you wanted to go fishing and hunting, and you fell in love with José Luis Cuevas, and you fell in love with [Rico] Lebrun, and you fell in love with

[Roberto] Matta [Echaurren], and you fell in love with [Raphael] Canogar, and you had no love for me. What did you want me to do when I felt rejected like a poor girl with no love?"

"Well," he said, "I have to make money, and these people are selling."

I said, "Well, that's not my fault because you're not selling my work. The people have to be educated, don't they?"

"Well, let me see what I can do. When do you want to have this exhibition?"

I said, "Whenever you say so".

"Next spring," March, I think it was. "We have to make a catalog. I need the photographs and the whole thing. You come out, we'll put it together and design it and get it ready."

So I had the show. I had twenty-one boxes in the show. His son had just come with him, and he was a musician who was a composer, Stephen Simone, and he didn't have the slightest idea about art. But he was going to be his partner because Thom Andreolas had left. Thom Andreolas went to Taos [New Mexico] and opened up his gallery. First, I got him this exhibition space to be the director of the Stables Gallery in Taos. He'd crossed Simone--he lied to him--and Simone fired him for a letter

that he said he'd mailed and Thom was still carrying it around and he was afraid to mail it. He carried it around for a month telling Simone he'd mailed it. Simone found out about it and hit the fan and got rid of him. Well, Thom's a big man now; he's about [gestures] so tall. [laughter] He's got the new gallery in Taos. They fired him from the Stables. I got him the job. I went out of my way to help this man get organized; he was so sad and down. Now he won't even write to me, talk to me, speak to me. You know, I helped him, so therefore he doesn't want me. After all that.

So anyway, to get back to Silvan's son, who is a sweet man, but he knew nothing. So what does he do in the exhibition opening? He takes these people-- I told him about the boxes, each box in the show, and he had a photographic memory. He's taking people at an opening around on a tour in groups of ten explaining each box to them, and what's inside, and all about it. And out of the twenty-two we sold nineteen boxes that day, you know.

Simone says, "Well, are you happy?"

I said yes. I said, "What about these other two boxes here?"

He said, "Well, the printer, he wants one for the trade of the catalog," which was, I don't know, $1,500 or $2,000. "He wants to trade you for one. And if you're any

kind of a guy at all worthwhile, not a heel like some of my artist friends, you will give me one of these boxes for doing all of this for you." So, that took care of them. I had one left and by the end of the show, that was sold to a doctor who was one of his biggest collectors.

SMITH: Now, you had left Simone earlier because he wasn't showing your work often enough?

WAGNER: Right, he was not featuring me anymore. He wasn't interested, you know. He had love affairs with other artists. I mean, when he sold art, he'd go "Look! What you're looking at [is] a fantastic piece! How can you resist it?" And he'd get some poor soul trapped in there. [laughter] He had a beautiful gallery to do it in. I don't know if you remember the gallery or not, but--

SMITH: No.

WAGNER: It was an excellent gallery. It was one of the prettiest galleries in L.A. because it was out of all the mess. It was a big gallery in the front, maybe forty feet square, and then there was a patio garden that had an overhang that you walked out into, where he had his receptions and things, and that was all art. He had huge storage racks. Then you went into a room where there were just little drawings. Then all the way around his house he'd put a glass atrium, and the whole back between the house and the fence was all the gallery with gardens and

trees. It was just gorgeous. It was a beautiful place. I said, "How come you're going to move into this place? Nobody's going to come down here."

He said, "Zipcode 49. We have all the money. Don't you worry. They'll come here before they go to La Cienega," he says. And he was right. He built it, and he lived there. He lived in the house inside.

SMITH: Were you also submitting every year to the Los Angeles County [Museum of History, Science, and Art] annual shows?

WAGNER: In the beginning, yeah, I usually would, until they canceled that out. I submitted to very few exhibitions, unless they were very important ones. In those days, they had very big shows. They don't do that anymore in museums, they just don't bother, like the Corcoran [Gallery] back East.

SMITH: Like your picture that is in the Denver [Art] Museum, how did that get there?

WAGNER: That was actually a competitive award, a purchase award. That's how it got there.

SMITH: So you would keep track of what the various shows were that were going on around the country and decide if you wanted to submit?

WAGNER: You mean in those days?

SMITH: In those days, yeah.

WAGNER: Not too much. There was one place in L.A. at that time, it was called Brugger's Fine Arts Fowarding Service, and they had a list of what was going on. That was it. And the newspaper, the [Los Angeles] Times, they would always announce these things in the Times for important exhibitions when Arthur Millier was the critic. They don't do that anymore either. They don't bother.

SMITH: Another thing that Kienholz mentions in his interview is that in the late fifties, mid- to late fifties, there was an attitude of the younger artists, the artists around Ferus--I think he means more than that, the beat-generation group--that they were sick and tired of the art that was represented by [Lorser] Feitelson and [Howard] Warshaw and [Keith] Finch, and he runs off a list of names along with those, art that they thought was just crap and that they wanted to get away from and destroy. How did you feel at that time? Did you share that kind of a feeling, that that generation was pretty much crap?

WAGNER: That's exactly why I didn't have anything more to do with them, because that sort of attitude, sort of snob attitude of Hollywood. It was strictly a Hollywood clique, the whole bunch of them. I mean, all of them were a Hollywood clique, young, semi-beat people. They were all friends; half of them knew each other from Kansas and other parts of the United States. There was a snob thing about

that group. I've been in fights with artists of that group, on what you're saying, like [Craig] Kauffman, and Bob Irwin, and people like that, people who berated other artists and put them down, that their work was no good, while they're standing there showing me one line and a scribble on a piece of butcher's paper that's in an exhibition, calling that the great, you know. That's what really turned me off to the whole lot of them. I still have never forgiven most of them, because I still don't think they're that important, most of them. They're living on their own publicity and believing it. I still don't think they should be featured as the "syndicate" artists, because I don't think they really warrant it. You can't--I appreciate all artists. I mean, they have a right to be artists and they have a right to their expression just the way they are, whatever they want to do. If they want to paint it with feces, or pee on it, or burn it with cigarettes, or draw on it, fine. But they should not go around putting down other artists who are doing a different expression. This defeats the whole philosophy of artists and painters. Although, it's common. I think one time there was in the--at some place in Spain there was a large Rubens, and they commissioned El Greco to paint a painting, I believe, in there. And he said, "I wouldn't bother at all in here unless I can paint over all this crap that's on

the wall." So it goes back several centuries that artists think this way. I don't believe in negating other artists. There's always going to-- Artists are limited by their own limitations, and if a guy can't do any better than he's doing, that's his problem. But not to cut him down, not to cut down people like Lebrun, who gave his soul and his heart and his love for his drawings and his work and was a powerful artist. If I took a Lebrun and a Warshaw and a Keith Finch and put the three up against the wall and I took one of those guys--I'm not going to talk about them; just forget them--and put one of their works in between, you wouldn't even notice their work it would be so weak and wishy-washy. I'm not being old-fashioned about art. I just don't think that Warshaw and Finch and Lebrun and Channing Peake and Bob [Robert] Chuey and Herb [Herbert] Jepson and [Michael] Murphy, who were instructors to all these half-wits and taught them all they knew from the beginning, to have them turn around on their own instructors and belittle them and call themselves a power when they had nothing going at all-- Nobody cared about them. Nobody cared about Warshaw; he was a minor figure. Finch struggled; but he had his own problems to confront. And as for Lebrun, he was a very powerful European man who became very sick and died. He had a different soul than these people. How can this brash bunch of Hollywood

[people with] surface to about down to here in life go around putting down a man who's got a soul thirty feet deep? Because they were just a bunch of snots in those days. Just young; wanted to change the world. How the hell could they change the world? The dadaists did it years ago. They were trying to do something the dadaists had already done. Neo-dadaism has got to be very boring.

SMITH: We have a lot of places to go with this, but you said you got into a number of fights, not physical arguments--

WAGNER: Just discussions.

SMITH: Discussions.

WAGNER: Arguments. Usually we came to some kind of-- I always walked out of the place feeling that I hadn't a problem, but the others would take offense. So that meant-- Naturally, if an artist takes offense to somebody else, that means his own work is weak in the first place, right? Because you don't take offense to somebody who-- Like if it had been Feitelson or Lebrun or one of those guys and they said, "I hate your art," they'd say, "That's great! I love it; it's better than giving me some false criticism of it. I'm glad to hear you hate it. It makes me happy." You see? But these guys, if you would mention anything, "What is this that you're doing that is so deeply evolved here?" [grumbles] They'd get going and they'd

come over in groups and want to fistfight you, you know. Well, you see, that shows a sign of weakness right there. I laughed at it, you know, and would walk out of the place with a couple of writer friends of mine.

SMITH: Kienholz, in his oral history, says--

WAGNER: He was never that way. Never that way. Kienholz was a real person. Not anything to do with that group at all.

SMITH: Yeah, he left in '58, I guess.

WAGNER: Had nothing to do with that group.

SMITH: He said in his oral history that he really doesn't, he never knew much about art history. I don't know if this is true or not, but this is what he said in his oral history.

WAGNER: I doubt if he did. I doubt if he really did.

SMITH: And he wasn't interested.

WAGNER: He wasn't interested in it, no.

SMITH: What about, from your perception--did the people in the group, the Ferus group, seem to know much of art history? Did they know about dada?

WAGNER: We never discussed any of those kinds of things, because I don't think any of them even worried about art history. A lot of these guys were like they were inventing the typewriter, you know? Like it had never been done before.

SMITH: Well, what about you at that time, were you--

WAGNER: I wasn't interested in art history. I looked at books and paintings, contemporary art magazines, but I never really was interested in art history at that time. I didn't really get into art history until I went to Europe and got involved in living there and seeing and feeling, understanding that these guys are a bunch of second-rate citizens. You know, when you go to Europe and you see real art, you know, real masters. We're the only country in the world that gets away with this kind of stuff. Because Hollywood's big, powerful media. Gave it a lot of impact in those days. Now they don't even--they ignore those guys.

SMITH: Well, I'm not sure what you mean by that.

WAGNER: Hollywood is not even interested in artists.

SMITH: Would you explain what you mean by that, I'm not getting it.

WAGNER: Well, in those days, Hollywood gave all those people big impact. They were all in a clique. The filmmakers, and the artists, and the writers, and the poets, and the faggots, and all these people, they all worked--

SMITH: You mean in the sixties?

WAGNER: --together, and it was a very synthetic world.

SMITH: In the sixties are we talking about?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Say at the time of that big show in '66, the Six Los Angeles Artists show?

WAGNER: You mean in the museum?

SMITH: At the [Los Angeles] County Museum of Art.

WAGNER: Most of them were in that show, naturally. They were in it, sure. But I always felt that you could never become part of their clique, you know? They lived in another world over there. I never was part of Hollywood in my life, and I'm still never going to be part of Hollywood, because it's a symbol that I don't like, you know. They built it up. They've got enough media people on television and movies and documentary films, all different ways of building up that particular group. And then, of course, all of the galleries have cashed in on them to take a loss, Dwan Gallery, and people like that.

SMITH: Do you think that group was built up--is it your feeling, your reaction, that that group was built up at the expense of other artists in the area, not just the older artists, but a broader range of artists?

WAGNER: Well, by that group forming, it's excluded about 90 percent of the artists in California. Yeah, the powers to be. It's changing now, though, because I've noticed now that a lot of the old museum directors and curators are not men anymore, and the women are interested in other ways of

thinking, I think. They're becoming more tolerant to the other artists, and it's coming back, slowly. I think these guys will just be a passing fancy. You can't live with minimal art for the rest of your life, you know. It's passing.

SMITH: Let me ask you, in terms of the artist groups that you were involved in, were there any black artists or Mexican artists, Mexican-American artists?

WAGNER: In that group, or any group?

SMITH: The groups that you were involved with.

WAGNER: I was involved in the Sixty-six Signs of Neon group with Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell and John Outterbridge, and a lot of black artists.

SMITH: What about in terms of the Los Angeles art community, was it an integrated community? Were there blacks and Chicanos involved?

WAGNER: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah. Yeah, there were always blacks and Chicano artists in California. Oh, yeah.

SMITH: But were they involved in the galleries? Same things you were going to? Who were some of the people that you knew?

WAGNER: Mel Edwards was one, who was a sculptor, black sculptor. I knew all of these guys I just mentioned, these black artists. There was a lot of Chicano art--Frank Romero and Chavez, and all of that group from Los Four.

There's always been a connection; even Indians, American Indians, Navaho Indians. I was involved there, I had an exhibition once--well, three of us were actually having an exhibition together at Simone Gallery: Roland Reese and--

SMITH: Roland Reese is black?

WAGNER: Roland Reese is white. He was in Denver then, he was a painter. He wasn't doing the environments, he was actually doing painting. And Carl Gorman, who was R. C. Gorman's father, who was a Navaho, who was an excellent painter. [R. C.] Gorman is a commercial hack, you know, just knock them out sort of thing. But actually, his father was a painter. We were with Simone there. He had Mexican artists, Cuevas and [Leonel] Góngora.

SMITH: But in Los Angeles, within the Los Angeles community, were the black artists, the Mexican-American artists at the same galleries, were they at the same coffeehouses?

WAGNER: They had the Brockman Gallery on Degnan Boulevard that's been going for years, a black gallery in the Crenshaw district. They showed wonderful black artists' works, you know.

SMITH: One gets the sense that it was only a handful of white artists who became important in terms of Los Angeles in the fifties and sixties.

WAGNER: It's true. The others were rejected by the Ferus

Gallery, who took it over. They were the ones who really were responsible for cutting everything down of all the other artists, and just building this one group, the "syndicate."

SMITH: What about women artists in Los Angeles in the fifties and sixties?

WAGNER: Oh, there were lots of women artists.

SMITH: Such as?

WAGNER: They're not-- There were hundreds and hundreds of male artists and hundreds and hundreds of women artists, and they were all exhibiting somewhere, in galleries and museums. But when it came to the international scene and the big scene, they were cut out, just like that, to this select group. And that's why, the reason, right now artists are getting a little bit irritated by it, I'm sure. Especially by the new museums, where they're still cut out, most of the California artist, along with a few others, and show all over the world, different places, to be cut out of an exhibition that's supposed to be a museum for Los Angeles artists, and then it's all New York. Or these damn galleries that-- Few "syndicates," you know. It'll always be that way until they get rid of the powers that be.

SMITH: The powers that be, who are?

WAGNER: Well, New York, basically. [Leo] Castelli, Walter

Hopps.

SMITH: You got into a fistfight with Walter Hopps once.

WAGNER: Well, not a fistfight. I just punched him. No, he didn't retaliate. [laughter]

SMITH: Could you explain what happened?

WAGNER: Well, he just wanted all of the artists to be-- have nothing to do with the other artists in town, stay away from all other artists and just be exclusive.

SMITH: He told this to the--

WAGNER: He told that to the group, and Dane Dixon said, "Punch the son of a bitch in the nose."

SMITH: Where did this take place?

WAGNER: In the Ferus Gallery.

SMITH: In the Ferus Gallery. About what time, do you recall?

WAGNER: What year?

SMITH: What year, yeah.

WAGNER: Probably in the sixties.

SMITH: Were you drunk at the time?

WAGNER: No, it was the late fifties.

SMITH: So you were kind of angry, and--

WAGNER: Oh, I really used to get really, emotionally angry in those days with people who came up with that kind of garbage. I didn't care who he was.

SMITH: So you heard him say this, or-- I'm trying to

reconstruct the circumstances. You were all in the Ferus Gallery, and Walter Hopps was talking--

WAGNER: With Jim [James] Elliott and a few other people, a few other directors.

They all came one time, I remember, to an exhibition at Sears Roebuck in Westwood that was put on by Arthur Secunda. There was an invitational show for 150 artists in the show. We each had a space, like fifteen to twenty pieces. It opened on the night that [John F.] Kennedy was shot, that day, so it had a rather depressed start. So they didn't open it until the next night, the following day. All of this group, all of these young shavetails, you know, young guys that looked like little babies. There was Walter, and there was Jim Elliott, a couple of other museum directors, all walking through the place all dressed up in suits and neckties and looking very, very efficient, and not speaking to a soul in the place. They were all in the exhibition; they were all represented, every one of them. But it was something. I'll never forget that scene as long as I live. You could see how that whole clique was embedded right there and who ran it, locked right in.

This is what I'm talking about. Then I said, "You poor, unfortunate people who have sold out for the rest of your lives, you can't even make art, you've got to get some guy in Santa Monica to make your art for you."

SMITH: Meaning? What are you talking about?

WAGNER: There's a guy in Santa Monica that makes all their art for them. They just order it, and they make it, the plastic stuff. They don't do anything. They just give them a design and they make it.

SMITH: Well, it's their design, though.

WAGNER: Yeah, I know. Send me fifty pieces for a show in New York; send me fifty pieces for a show in Chicago, all the same, you know. There's a guy in Santa Monica that does that kind of stuff. I met him one time at Renata Druck's party. He told me he does it for all of them.

SMITH: Did you--

WAGNER: That's not sincere to me when an artist has somebody else building their art for them. There's nothing there, they're just a bunch of commercial hacks! It's sad. And they are the ones who they actually publicize, and the museums haven't got brains enough to know that, they've been so brainwashed, you know.

SMITH: Did you ever apologize to Hopps?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, we're friends. I've seen him a lot of times, he says, "Gordon, how ya doing? What you think about opening a gallery in Topanga Canyon," when he's about ready to steal an assemblage out of George [Herms]'s house. [laughter] "I've got to come and see what you're doing."

SMITH: Does he come and see what you're doing?

WAGNER: No. Richmond Art Center, somebody was having a class there--

SMITH: Where Tom [Thomas] Marioni was?

WAGNER: Somebody was having a class up there at Richmond Art Center in San Francisco, Oakland, or Berkeley or--

SMITH: Richmond.

WAGNER: Richmond. This young student told me, "I was talking the other day to my teacher about you, and I said, 'Well, Gordon Wagner told me this,' and this man came around from the back of the wall and said, 'Where the hell's Gordon Wagner, tell him hello.' And he said, 'Who are you?' And he said, 'My name's Walter Hopps.'" [laughter] This is about a year or two ago. I like Walter as a person. I think he's-- He has a nice personality.

He had a mental breakdown too, you know, himself. Arthur Secunda took over his class. But he was-- No, I have nothing against Walter Hopps at all now. I think he's okay. It's just a question. I have nothing against any of these people, they can do whatever they want to do. But I think they're being too exclusive in the museums by only including a few of the-- Like [Henry] Geldzahler in New York: I remember I read something he made a statement on one time. He said, "The artists have got to be tough on themselves. Because from now on in the art [world], there aren't going to be any new discoveries. We're going to

take the older artists and put them in the cartel and leave it that way." You see? And that's what's happening.

SMITH: Well, back at this time, in the mid-fifties, late fifties, early sixties, were you a beatnik?

WAGNER: Well, I was a little old to be beat, but I was always with the beats. I guess you might have called me an older beat. The beat generation in the fifties were probably in their twenties, right?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: And in the fifties I was in my forties. I was very sympathetic to the beats, and I hung out at all their beat coffeehouses. They visited me, and they liked me, in Topanga Canyon. Topanga was sort of a dropping-off place between San Francisco and Venice. It was a very active place for beats. Yeah, and I loved the beat poets, and I knew the beats, and I went to the Gashouse, the beat scene, and other coffeehouses, at Bob [Robert] De Witt's in Topanga.

SMITH: Were you writing poetry at the time?

WAGNER: Yeah, I'd written some. I never wrote poetry, I wrote word pictures. I was never a poet in the sense of being a poet, you know, just word pictures.

SMITH: Okay. Well, briefly continuing the chronology, you stayed in Topanga, then your wife died, then you moved to Mexico. When did you come back to the United States, then,

after then?

WAGNER: Well, I moved down there for about two years, two or three years. I came back about 1962, back to Topanga.

SMITH: Same place or different?

WAGNER: No, I rented-- I knew this friend, a girl in Topanga who used to eat with me at Bob De Witt's, and she was going away. She wanted me to rent her house, because she didn't know how long she would be gone. She might be gone for a year or ten years. So she had a great studio downstairs and the house on the top, all nice windows. It was just gorgeous. Well, I rented it for $40 a month. A beautiful place. At the end of the year, she came back, so I had to move. I moved down to the Silver Lake district, Echo Park area.

SMITH: You knew [Ramblin'] Jack Eliot?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, I knew him in Topanga when he used to sit on the highway and sort of entertain people while they were changing tires on their cars, and help people along the road. He'd always travel on the road with his guitar. That's before he went to Spain on his motorcycle and fell into the lake. [laughter] He always told me that story. He was going around this curve, and he doesn't know what happened at all, but the next thing, the motorcycle and himself were both in the lake. [laughter] Yeah, I liked Jack Eliot. He's a sweet man.

SMITH: And Lord Buckley you knew?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, the Lord lived there. He lived in a place called Buchanan Flats, and they'd set up this old, kind of an auto-camp house.

SMITH: Why was he called Lord Buckley?

WAGNER: Well, he classified himself as that. All the people were princes or princesses, and his wife was Lady Buckley. Lady Buckley wore pink leotards and danced about. A beautiful person, really. She spent most of her time up out of Las Vegas in Mattress City, where he had five acres of mattresses stretched out across the land, and they would dance and spring in the mattresses. That's where Lady Buckley spent most of her time. He was so square! He wouldn't even allow a porch swing on his back porch. [laughter]

"Lord"--this is viewing the Grand Canyon--"Lord, look at that." [imitates Buckley] "What a gasser, that's the biggest ditch I've ever seen." [laughter]

He was a marvelous man. Great voice; one of the greatest voices I think we've had, according to Henry Miller; he even thinks that. And ad-libbed right off the top of his head. He'd come out with things and really make you laugh.

SMITH: Did you know [Jack] Kerouac or Neil Cassidy?

WAGNER: No, I never met either Kerouac or Neil Cassidy. I

met [Gregory] Corso and [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti and Snyder, Gary Snyder, those sorts of people. From San Francisco more.

SMITH: Down in Topanga, or--

WAGNER: I met them in Topanga. I met two of them-- I met Ferlinghetti in San Francisco, but I met the other two in Topanga.

SMITH: Did you think of Topanga as being a place that had spiritual power?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, energy; great place. Great place for just about everything. It does have a-- It has its own-- It's a music canyon, that's what it is.

SMITH: What do you mean by that?

WAGNER: I don't know, it just generates music. It just comes out of the rocks and mountains.

SMITH: So there was something special about it that wasn't in, say, Beverly Glen or Laurel Canyon or--

WAGNER: Oh, different altogether than Laurel Canyon, that's Hollywood, you know. And the [San Fernando] Valley was different, and Malibu was different. No, Topanga was an isolated community that was full of people who just wanted to get away from all of those other things. Eccentrics, absolutely. No, it was-- There was a ruralness, but yet there was a sophistication. There was an intellect, and there was the primitive. It had all of

these different facets that you can't get in a homogenized place like Laurel Canyon, full of corporate people and company-oriented types and professionals. Never had any of that in Topanga. Now they do, I'm sure, but they didn't in those days. I'm sure they found it now and ruined it. It can't be the same.

SMITH: You never lived in Venice?

WAGNER: Yeah, I lived in Venice. I lived there for about a year, not quite, nine months. I lived in May Murray's boudoir, down by the Ballona Creek bridge in an old Moorish-type house. I had a nice studio there, temporarily. I liked it.

SMITH: You mentioned before that after your wife died, you never really worked again.

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE

FEBRUARY 7, 1987

SMITH: Well, Gordon, I wanted to ask you how and where you met Virginia [Copeland Wagner], your second wife, and when.

WAGNER: I met Virginia in 1963 in Oaxaca, Mexico, on the evening of December 18 in the atrium of the Soledad church at a fiesta for the patron saint of Oaxaca, the Virgin of Soledad.

SMITH: Like those drawings, you captured that in the drawings in the exhibit.

WAGNER: They were with the fireworks and all of the Indians. A huge celebration, because it is one of the biggest celebrations in Oaxaca. And, funny, in the afternoon I met a woman who I had talked to in the drugstore in front of the house where I lived in Oaxaca, and we were talking about Arizona and New Mexico and Navahos and whatnot. And she said, "I have a friend here in Oaxaca that lived with the Navahos; you might like to meet her." And this same lady, with her friend, came to the fiesta. I saw them, and she walked over, introduced me to Virginia, and I said, **Yata-hei**, in Navaho, which means hello. And that is when she said Yata-hei back. So we talked a little bit. I lifted her up so she could see over the heads of all these people, the fireworks, the **castillos**, and she got very indignant about that.

SMITH: You didn't ask her if you could pick her up?

WAGNER: No, I just liked her, so I picked her clear up. [laughter] She disappeared on me after that. I used to see her around Oaxaca, and she'd wave, but she always had somebody with her, people walking with her. She had very long hair and braided yarn in her pony tail. It was beautiful to see her walking. I drove around in my old jeep a lot. One day I'm drawing in my studio, and there was a knock on the door. It was Virginia asking me--well, my friend was with me, Hedy [Mergenthaler], my Swiss mistress--if we'd like to come for a drink at their place in the Pensión Suisse, which was in Oaxaca, where they were staying, for a couple of days from then. I thought it was a good idea. I don't know about Hedy, what she thought of the idea. So we went to the party, and I remember I drank up most all their scotch. At least that's what Virginia told me later. Then I took her around to different places, she and her friend, to different villages and some other fiestas, a New Year's Eve party in Teotitlán del Valle, which is a weaving town of Oaxaca. And she danced. She was a dancer from New York; she lived at that time in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She was teaching dance and had a school at the fine arts museum in Santa Fe [Museum of New Mexico]. I didn't see anymore of her after that, I took off. I was going back to the United States just about the time I met

her. I didn't see her anymore until about 1967. I had a friend who lived in Rustic Canyon who went to Saint John's College in Santa Fe, and I said, "Well, I think it would be nice if you met this lady, Virginia, you'd like her." So it was kind of a liaison I was establishing between us. They kept in contact, and when Virginia came to California, she came to stay with my friend in Rustic Canyon. Well, I was teaching in Rustic Canyon that day when she showed up, and I just picked her up. [laughter]

SMITH: Again without asking her?

WAGNER: She didn't complain that time. I'd already separated from my mistress. She ran off with my best friend in Mexico a year before. A guy named Paul. We went on a trip down there, and she just decided she wanted to go with him. So I was a year without any lady.

SMITH: Can I ask you--

WAGNER: So Virginia came along about the right time. We were married in 1967 on a rock in Topanga Canyon by I Ching. And then we were married by the justice of peace in Albuquerque [New Mexico] in July.

SMITH: Of '67?

WAGNER: Yeah, first we were married May 30, then in July by the justice of the peace. That's nineteen years ago, isn't it?

SMITH: Then you were married again when you became

Catholics. When you converted to Catholicism you were married for a third time?

WAGNER: I was married twice again to her. That was way back. [The Catholic ceremony] was only six years ago.

SMITH: Why do you refer to Hedy as your mistress and not just your girlfriend? You always use that term.

WAGNER: Well, she wasn't a girlfriend, she lived with me. She was my lady, I guess you'd call her.

SMITH: There's no special reason.

WAGNER: We're still good friends, Hedy and I are good friends. She lives in Mount Washington. She has a good job with a Mexican airline, one of the managers. Yeah, we're good friends.

SMITH: And Virginia, when you met her she was a dancer?

WAGNER: Yeah, she taught dance in Santa Fe, she had a school. And she was a dancer in New York before that, in dance companies. She had her school there in Columbia University.

SMITH: After you married her, is that when you moved to New Mexico, or did she move to Echo Park?

WAGNER: She moved to Echo Park. I haven't been back to Mexico since.

SMITH: New Mexico.

WAGNER: No, I haven't been back to Mexico since, but New Mexico, we used to go back and forth to New Mexico in the

summer. Stay for two or three months.

SMITH: You haven't been back to Mexico--

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: --since 1967? Not once?

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: Not even to cross the border?

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: Why not?

WAGNER: I don't know, just never have any desire to go anymore.

SMITH: That whole side of you is now gone?

WAGNER: Just disappeared.

SMITH: Disappeared.

WAGNER: I was talking to a friend of mine last night, he was kind of keying me up to go back. I don't think it's the same as it was when I was there, you know. It's probably changed so much, the different places. But you never know, it might still be fine-- Because a lot of people go back there and love it, you know.

SMITH: Well, once when we were talking you mentioned that after Alcatraz, after the Indians occupied Alcatraz, that you felt you really shouldn't--it was becoming more difficult to do the Indian motifs in your work.

WAGNER: After Alcatraz?

SMITH: After the Indians occupied Alcatraz. So in

general, about this time you're moving away from the Mexican and the Indian and the Asian influences in your work, after '67?

WAGNER: Yeah, I think I'd already been through it. I mean, our lives change. We go through different cycles about every seven or eight years, different values and different ways of seeing and doing things. Different blondes or redheads or brunettes; some guys change women, and other people change moods, and countries, and feelings. I think that it's always underneath; you never forget those things, they're always underneath. You're not divorcing them out of your mind. But I don't think you have to dwell on them forever, I think you can move on to other things.

SMITH: This is a followup question from our last session, but in **Icon to Great Railroads**, you take all these railroad things that you've found. The railroads were one of the main ways of destroying the Indian way of life in the western part of the United States, and you take all these railroad objects, and then you construct them into something that looks like an Indian piece of art. I mean, to me there's a social comment in it.

WAGNER: Well, railroad pieces to me don't really go along with that. Railroad pieces to me-- The railroad was a very romantic piece of machinery, especially the old railroads.

SMITH: But the old railroads were what destroyed the Indians, or one of the things that destroyed the Indian way of life, the laying down of the railroads.

WAGNER: Did I say that?

SMITH: No, you didn't say that.

WAGNER: I never thought I said it, because I don't think the old railroads ever destroyed the Indians' way of life, not at all. Indians could care less about the railroad. There were people-- In fact, I don't think the Indians' way of life is destroyed at all; I think their way of life is stonger than ours, because they have the inner soul of-- An Indian will always be an Indian, and we can't ever be an Indian or know what the Indian's thinking, no way. They're Indians. I don't care if we were here for ten thousand more years, we could never understand the Indians' way of life, because their nature-- They have their own spirits and their own gods and their own values. The railroad could go through the reservation, they'd take what they could off of it. If something was thrown away, they'd use it. They would take advantage of the railroad, because the railroad to them would be just-- They don't use the railroad themselves, and actually railroads don't go through their reservations in any place. The reservations are set apart. Like the Navaho reservation is-- A third of Arizona belongs to the Navahos, and the railroad runs along

the edge of it. Indians don't live anyplace near the railroad. When the settlers in the West came out, they wanted to kill the Indians, but they came in covered wagons, and they came by horse, and they came in a lot of ways before the railroad came along. Actually, the railroad employed Indians to build the railroad. It didn't bother them if they were laying ties or doing something else. I don't think the railroad destroyed the Indians at all, the way of life, because the Apaches are very alive; the Navahos are alive; the Hopis are alive; the Paiutes are alive; the Sioux and the Shoshone, they're all alive. The ones who have lost some of their culture are maybe the Osage and the Indians who own oil wells in Oklahoma, some of them. Not in the Southwest.

TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE

FEBRUARY 14, 1987

SMITH: Today I wanted to get into a discussion of your boxes. It's a big topic. Can you tell me when you started? When did you begin to make boxes?

WAGNER: Well, my first boxes were different from the boxes of today. My first boxes were actually made in Mexico using a lot of the objects found in Mexico, in junk places and out in the graveyards and carnivals and whatnot, where I could pick up objects. Those boxes were related to a lot of the Day of the Dead and humorous things about Mexico in sort of a funky way.

SMITH: This was in the early sixties?

WAGNER: Yeah, yeah.

SMITH: At the same time you were doing **Funeraria** and **Between Heaven and Hell**?

WAGNER: Yeah, right, early sixties, exactly. Then the development started, and I went through various ways of doing boxes with different expressions. They became the object, but I got away from Mexico. A lot of the boxes were almost like putting objects in, like assemblage pieces, you know, but they usually were a narrative in mind. But there was still that old material, old rusty toys or rusty trains and things, rusty pieces of wood and junk and metal, related to painting in the background.

SMITH: Now, in Mexico, in Mexican folk art, you have the arks, and the cathedrals, sporting scenes, where all the little clay figures are put together. There's even a box form where the folk artists will just put in like a whole kitchen, all these little toy kitchen utensils. Were you familiar with those kinds of things?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. I used to enjoy looking at them, but I never really used that as a stimulation for my work, because that kind of narrative didn't interest me. Mine was more on the humor and dada relationship.

SMITH: You were in Oaxaca in the early sixties, right?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Did you know any of the artists who worked--Indian artists or Mexican artists, folk artists, who worked in Oaxaca, like Teodora Blanco in [Santa Maria de] Atzompa?

WAGNER: Well, I met them, I met a few, but basically I was doing my own work. Artists just don't socialize much in Oaxaca. Even [Rufino] Tamayo was around there at one time, you know. But no, that-- I knew a few in Oaxaca, painters, Figueroa, people like this. And Laventa. A few people that I actually came in contact with by looking for objects, they seemed to be interested in the same sort of thing that I was, and I got to know them pretty well. I was really into my own work there, completely. And really feeling Mexico, the Indian of the Zapotec and their

culture. I knew more anthropologists than I knew artists. They were studying the Oaxacan market system. They said it was the most complex market system in the world, the traveling market, everyday it went to a different town. They seemed to interest me more, because I was sort of being-- Constructing my boxes and doing my objects, I was sort of an anthropologist in my own rights, by using the things of their culture and rearranging them.

SMITH: What were the boxes that you did in the early sixties, then?

WAGNER: Well, a lot of boxes that I did at that time were the **Day of the Dead**, **The Devil Set the Church on Fire**. The titles are numerous; I'm trying to remember some of the better ones. **The Bracero**. A lot of boxes related to love and Indians. There was one box in particular that I really liked (it's in a collection now), called **The Spectator**.

SMITH: Could you--

WAGNER: It belongs in a collection.

SMITH: Whose collection?

WAGNER: I'm trying to remember her name. She lives in Santa Monica. Paula Fishman. She was with Anhalt Gallery for years. That particular box was using a cardboard piece of folk art they call **entierro**, or the interment. When you turn the crank, the procession, the funeral procession, came up--first came the people carrying the coffin, then

came the procession, and then came the priest, and it went around on an endless belt. It came up through the devil's mouth and went down through the gates of heaven, around and around it went on a crank. I had bones on the box sticking out. Then they made coffins that you pulled the string and the corpse would look out of the hole in the coffin, and I had that centered in the piece. So every time the funeral passed above or underneath the man in the coffin, I had it hooked up so that he would pop out of the coffin to look at his own funeral. He was the spectator. It's a beautiful piece.

The other one was the **Day of the Dead** box I did for another collector by the name of Niels Baggi, who was a great collector of those sort of boxes. He was one of my collectors from the [Silvan] Simone Gallery. He had one where the coffin was on the table, and all of these things were going on in the foreground. You'd pull the string on the outside and the man popped up to look at all of the people and things about him. You could look up in the corner and you could see him in the mirror from the box, so he didn't--you could still see him, it was reflected down. These were funny boxes at that time, in Mexico. Using things off the street: pieces of this, fragments of that, angels and devils and all sorts of metals. But not busy, not just thrown together, but a narrative. Less is

more. Down to the essence, but using black velvet and laces and all these things.

SMITH: How did Simone feel about your boxes?

WAGNER: Well, about **The Spectator** box, in particular, I remember he had it in the very front of the gallery on the wall as you came in. He had about three hunting dogs, and one of the hunting dog's names was Kasha. And every morning, Kasha would go in the door, go over to **The Spectator**, and sit up and howl, and bay and bay at this piece that was in the gallery at that time, before it was sold to Paula Fishman out of that show. So Simone always felt that my works--as I told you once before, I was a risk, you know. He just respected me for what I did, and my free spirit, you know.

SMITH: Did your boxes sell?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. Well, that one sold.

SMITH: Much better than the assemblages?

WAGNER: About the same, yeah.

SMITH: But you said that the assemblages hardly sold at all.

WAGNER: That's right, in the very beginning, but he did sell some assemblages. In the first show, as I said, my assemblages, people didn't hardly see them, except the critic, [Arthur] Millier, who gave me a great review on the assemblages, and sort of didn't pay much attention to the

paintings.

SMITH: The boxes are somewhat of an unusual art form. Conceptually, what were you drawing on when you decided to put things into a box form? Were you already familiar with the work of [Joseph] Cornell?

WAGNER: Well, I was familiar with Cornell, but I really wasn't that much interested in Cornell at that moment, or any other artist of box construction, actually. I wasn't even stimulated by other artists at that point, because I was in Mexico so much I didn't see them. Actually, the thing that really got me into boxes, I think was that it was a lot more--it fit better for me to combine objects and work in three dimensions than on a two-dimensional surface. I was tired of painting; I'd painted too long. It was an excitement to move through assemblage. And I knew that assemblage--I was going to get into something else, and the box just manifested itself for me from these old funky boxes like I'm talking about in Mexico. They got more concise, more symbolic, for a while. I was using-- In the mid-sixties, '67, '68, during the revolution of the psychedelics and whatnot, there was a great period in there when everything was spiritual and centered, mandalic in form. And the mandala, I went into that pretty much, and I created probably a hundred boxes related to centered forms, the centering of the light. That took me back when I

moved-- When I was married to Virginia, we moved to New Mexico, where it was possible for me to go to wonderful dumps in New Mexico, just outstanding dumps. No one in New Mexico, in Taos, was particularly interested in assemblage so I had the whole thing to myself, practically, until two or three other artists that I met, who came to see me, I found out they were also doing assemblages. So we used to spend-- We'd have more fun going to a dump than we would any other social function in Taos. Enjoyed the dump, enjoyed each other, have our picnics and really have a great day.

SMITH: What dumps were you going to?

WAGNER: Well, one was in Hondo; it was a wonderful one up on the top of a mountain. You drove up around and there it was on the crest of the hill. Marvelous dump. Things there that had gone back, oh, I imagine 150 years, laying around in that dump. The other dump was an especially exciting dump because it was long. You forded a river, and then you drove up this long road winding through all of the debris, from refrigerators to old cars to pieces of this and fragments of that, dead animals and bones, objects and junk. Then you curved around and the final destination was the Penitente Cemetery of Valdez Valley. So it would be nothing while you were in the dump to have to stand at attention and bow for a funeral that was going by through

the dump to arrive up at the top of the cemetery. Actually, the cemetery, all around the cemetery, was also a dump. So you could-- They had a fence there to keep the goats out from chewing up the paper flowers from the crosses and other things, but basically the dump surrounded the cemetery even on the top. This dump was hundreds of years of civilization. Things there that were magnificent! So therefore, when I found these dumps and I found these things, it was--

SMITH: Like what?

WAGNER: I started working into this form because I was interested in the centering, in the spiritual, the Buddha, the Taoist, the mystics, the meditation, the American Indian, the quaternity of the four directions. All these things were laid out for me right there.

SMITH: Were these Hispano dumps? or Anglo? or Indian?

WAGNER: No, all Hispano. Yeah, both of them. No Indian dumps there, no. What was so nice about that form was that they were contemplative. They were not really narrative, they were more fetishlike, power pieces, you know. And they would combine painting, geometric painting and whatnot, in relation to the objects themselves, which were all sorts of American Indian and Spanish imagery.

SMITH: Do **Mexico** and **Fetish** come from that period? The two boxes, the large boxes that you had in your show?

WAGNER: Yeah, they both come from that period. The Fetish comes a little later, but the **Mexico** comes from that period exactly.

SMITH: And is that stuff that you found in Mexico or New Mexico?

WAGNER: There I found in Mexico.

SMITH: Okay.

WAGNER: But it all-- That was about '64.

SMITH: 'Sixty-eight is **Mexico**.

WAGNER: No, I mean when I found the stuff.

SMITH: Oh. The **Devil Exorcisor** is from that period, correct?

WAGNER: Yeah, it is, but it's a whole different concept. It's an enclosed box all the way around with mirrors, sending the devil to infinity. It's different.

SMITH: And then you have the box with the adobe house with the train--I can't remember the title of it--that you had in the show at Barnsdall [Junior Art Center]

WAGNER: The ship, you mean?

SMITH: Yeah, the ship, right.

WAGNER: **The Phantom Ship**, the adobe house with the room in the back with the picture of Lily Langtree, and then the Indian fireplace, and the adobe floor, and the crucifix on the wall, and a chair or two. Like a New Mexico house, adobe. The whole house is that; had bullfight posters on

one corner, theater announcements on another corner. Then you look through the door of the adobe house at one point, and you look in, and there's a lake with all mountains and trees completely around it. If you look for a moment, this ship will appear, a double-ended ship, and it comes out, and it goes back and disappears right in front of your eyes. It's a pretty magic piece. It's called **The Phantom Ship**, is the actual name of the box.

SMITH: What size are the boxes that you were doing initially? What kind of scale were you working on?

WAGNER: At that time?

SMITH: Yeah, at that time.

WAGNER: In New Mexico?

SMITH: Yeah, in New Mexico.

WAGNER: Small, small boxes. Maybe the largest one would be sixteen by twelve [inches] or something.

SMITH: But **The Phantom Ship** is larger than that.

WAGNER: Yeah, but that is not a box, **The Phantom Ship**. That is actually a construction, a house. That's a different-- Like the **Devil Exorcisor** and **The Phantom Ship** are constructions. Like **Firaskew**'s a construction, it is not a box.

SMITH: Okay. So you were also beginning to do constructions at that time, simultaneously?

WAGNER: Yeah. Yeah, at that time. **The Phantom Ship** was

one, and I have another one that you've probably never seen. It's called the **Zodiac Box**. It moves one revolution an hour and goes through the whole twelve signs of the zodiac. It's in a construction similar to the **Devil Exorcisor**. You're looking in and seeing a change all the time, with the planets and the signs.

SMITH: Were a lot of your boxes and constructions at this time mechanized, motorized?

WAGNER: Not that many, but a few, yeah.

SMITH: That's something that you've stopped doing, it seems.

WAGNER: I'm working on one in San Pedro called **The Castle of the Graf van Rommelgem**. I hope to have that finished someday. That's Flemish. **Graf** means count, right?, [and] **rommel** is junk, and **gem** is the place. And that's what they called me in Belgium. The Graf van Rommelgem, Count of the Junk Place.

SMITH: Well, at the same time you were-- It seems I've read about very large-scale environmental things that you were doing that were used in theatrical performances. They sound like your constructions, but on a very, very large scale. What were some of those that you did? The dance piece?

WAGNER: I've done two.

SMITH: Or the piece with dancers.

WAGNER: I've done two: one was in Eugene, Oregon, at the Open Gallery, and the other one was in San Francisco, at the Vorpal Gallery, upstairs on the top floor of that gallery. It needs lots of space, because we actually constructed the box about eleven by eleven by eleven.

SMITH: Feet, right?

WAGNER: Yes. With mirrors and Pepper's ghost-glass. Pepper's ghost is something that was used in the time of the early theater. Samuel Pepper, he invented this great glass that could be tipped at a certain angle, and the audience would see phantoms. I had them; fixed phantoms and mirrors on the other side. I had dancers, mime--two mimes, and two dancers, and two poets. And dream readers: four women reading their dreams and dressed up in their dreams simultaneously, bumping into each other like the other one never existed. An audience on each side, about 150 people on each side, so each side absolutely saw something different from the other side as far as the box was concerned. They changed sides at the intermission, everybody shifted, then they saw a different expression of the same piece. The reason I had the two poets, two dancers--because they switched. These read to this audience, and these read to this, then they moved through and they'd read the same thing over here, and back and forth. And these mimes would work on both sides and go

right through the box.

SMITH: Couldn't the audience hear what was happening on both sides of the box? I mean, they could hear both poets reading, couldn't they?

WAGNER: Not really. No, they couldn't. And if they did, it made no difference, because we had four dream readers simultaneously reading. The box was deep enough so the poet could do what he wanted over here, and this poet could do what he wanted. There was no interference.

SMITH: Was the performance aspect of it, was that your conception?

WAGNER: Yeah. The whole thing was my conception and choreographed.

SMITH: Did Virginia [Copeland Wagner] do the choreographing?

WAGNER: No, I did the choreography. Virginia did tai chi sword in the piece. One side tai chi, one side tai chi sword.

SMITH: Who were the poets?

WAGNER: The one up in Oregon, I don't think we had a title for that piece. But the one in San Francisco, we called it **Living in Infinity.** It was a little different concept, different box, but it was basically the same. We had wonderful musicians in Oregon that made all their own instruments out of auto parts and junk and scraped things

on the floor. They sat in four corners of the gallery, and we got all this wonderful music. When I got to San Francisco, we had all these dancers from San Francisco, and all the poets from San Francisco and from Berkeley. We had good talent to draw from; we had the best. We had a surrealist poet and a realist poet.

SMITH: Who were they?

WAGNER: One was Latif Harris and the other was Taddeo Young. They're both Bay Area poets. And dancers like Theodore Roszak's daughter, and people like that. And Manuel Nieto, he gave a whole performance. He was at Berkeley, Spanish, with his company.

SMITH: So you had different groups? The performers would change, then?

WAGNER: Yeah, it lasted for six weeks, each one, Saturday and Sunday nights. We always had a full house; never, never stopped coming, these people. Then I did it again with a different scene in Monterey; I had nothing. I did the same thing at Angel's Gate [Cultural Center], nothing.

SMITH: What do you mean nothing?

WAGNER: Nothing, nothing at all; just the actors and the performers, but nothing there. Just tape on the floor. I made a maze of tape that they could not cross the maze lines, and that was called, in Monterey at the Pacific Grove Art Center, it was called Loof Lirpa, which is April

Fool backwards. And at Angel's Gate, it was called The **Maze of Invisible Walls.** The mimes would grope along the walls trying to get out. Because I told the audience in the beginning, I said, "I was down in the bottom of the North Sea, and I was trapped, encased, within glass walls, and there was only one way out, and I could not find that. As I looked up, there were four depressed girls from Finland sitting on the corners of the mirrors throwing Pet Milk cans at each other while camels were walking on top of the water." I gave that image, from then on they would-- That was their confined area. They weren't all confined. There were some-- Like the world champion skateboard artist could do whatever he wanted to do. He was everywhere in San Pedro. Oh, it was a wonderful performance there. People were throwing their dreams in the air and flying through the air. It was like a Chagall, those dream readers. Each time I've done it, it seems to get better, you know. I haven't done it now for five years.

SMITH: You showed me a photograph of a piece that you had at your house in Echo Park, the piece with the chains, the piece that appeared and disappeared.

WAGNER: Yeah, that was twenty by twenty feet, and it had twelve elements of burned assemblage, of charred wood from Topanga Canyon, out of fires, from fences and--not trees, but pieces of wood with all the charcoal on them, hanging

on conveyor chains, like a cross form. So as it turned, these pieces from all of the sides would enter into the center. And there was a dancer, a nude dancer, black and white painted, and the pieces were black and white. So when they moved in, she would dance through these pieces until they would just almost close around her. In the meantime, Don Preston, who was with the Mothers of Invention, had a group called AHA, the Aesthetic Harmony Assemblage. All his instruments were all built out of porch swings, and springs, and chimes, and bumpers, and gongs, and junk. His sounds were fantastic. He had a piano with thumbtacks, and everything was about-- He was studying then with Harry Partch; he wasn't quite up to forty-three tones, but he was very close. He wasn't too far away from Harry Partch. It's hard to do that on a piano with only, what is it, twelve tones? But he really reached out. He would feel the shapes and the dancer, and the dancer felt the music and saw the shapes, and the whole thing became an integrated piece of art. It was a beautiful concept.

SMITH: This, the performance-art aspect, and the constructions and the boxes seemed to come simultaneously with the hippie movement. Is there a connection, or is that coincidence?

WAGNER: Well, at the time of the hippie movement, there

were a lot of people who wanted to do things. It wasn't that corporate attitude. They wanted to do things pure, not something for money, professionally cooked up. They did it for love. They did it for the pureness of art. That was a nice philosophy, and the young people-- There were lots of wonderful people within that movement that I could use as part of the actors and poets. Not all of them were hippies; some of them had already grown through it or were about to become. I had some younger than hippies even, a couple of them. But it was that era.

SMITH: And you were based here in Los Angeles and in New Mexico?

WAGNER: That's just one piece. Wait, now. When I got to doing these things in Oregon and in San Francisco, that was '77; the hippie movement was over. But there was a transition period going on where people had been there and wanted to continue, you see, wanted to do something. The only people that were hard to deal with in these performances, always, were the dancers, because they have some narcissistic thing going within them that builds up their egos to the point where they're very difficult to work with. Because they're very temperamental, where the poets are old tennis-shoe type people, you know, right off the street. A whole different philosophy. But the dancers, they want everything just the way they want it.

If the floor had one spot on it, they would complain; if the window was open, they would complain--if you closed the window, they would complain; if the lights weren't right, they would complain, it would show up one of their eyebrows too blue, or something. None of the other people--Everybody else wanted it and loved it. But they were always the prima donnas, you see. I find that's kind of the way dancers' personalities work anyway.

SMITH: Were you in Haight-Ashbury during the '67, '68 period?

WAGNER: No. No. I walked through it, and I still, when I go to San Francisco, I still go over there. There are some wonderful coffeehouses over there. I can't remember the name; was it the Beethoven? Was that the name of it? The Beethoven, I think, was a good one, where they used to play classical music.

SMITH: The Beethoven is in North Beach.

WAGNER: Maybe it moved. But in the old days it was there. There was another one there that was like an open garden inside and had a piano, and whatnot. That was another good one. My favorite coffeehouse in San Francisco wasn't even in Haight-Ashbury, it was the Meat Market on Noe and Twenty-fourth [Street] next to Bud's ice cream parlor. That was a true beat coffeehouse, with the old furniture. I liked that one.

SMITH: Yeah. In terms of the kinds of things you were doing at this period, were you getting much-- Was the [Los Angeles] Times reporting on what you were doing? Were they giving you reviews of the boxes, the assemblages?

WAGNER: Well, there was only one actual reviewer on the **Times** that reviewed everything I did during that period; that was William Wilson. He was never very favorable to me in his most of his reviews. He always said, "Puns are cute, kitsch, yuk, yuk," if it was a pun, or "He's continuing with that tap dance of death." Or one he uses a lot with other people, I've noticed, some word I can't remember. But it's the same. He doesn't change his wording, he just keeps writing the same things for everybody's reviews; it's almost identical, what he said about my work in 1978-- He's still--or '77--he's still talking about-- No, earlier than that--I'm mixed up; '69, '70 was about the last time he reviewed anything of mine. **Tintintabulate**, that's the word he always used. "They're tintintabulating." And I've noticed he's still using these words. No, I got reviews from others. I got good reviews from **Art International** and from **Art Week** and from **Artforum** and **Art News**, those magazines. But very little with the **Times**, very little on that score, you know?

WAGNER: What about the L.A. [Los Angeles] Free Press?

SMITH: They gave me always some things going there. Alex

Apostolides was sort of the art editor and in charge of things, and he gave me a whole front page once in the Free Press. And also in **Open City**, which was another magazine, or newspaper, in Los Angeles during that period.

SMITH: Did you know the people at the Free Press?

WAGNER: I knew lots of people at the Free Press over a period of time; photographers and writers, like Liza Williams, who I really enjoyed. They all lived in Echo Park, practically. Art Kunkin and Susan Smoka. And the photographer that photographed most of my things was a wonderful photographer and lived in Echo Park. I'm trying to remember her name. Sharon Ackerman. All of these people were great. The Free Press wasn't anything like it is today, it was really a fine paper. Jeanie Morgan, who was married then, I think, to Art Kunkin. There was a different love feeling to the paper, you know? Although it honestly stated about social comment. It covered everything.

SMITH: Well, did you feel it was a paper you could go talk to the art editor whenever you wanted to?

WAGNER: I'll be actually honest with you. I've never talked to any art editor in my life on any basis of trying to achieve any information or have a review given. I've never done that, never asked the newspaper to review my exhibitions to this day, ever. I have no intention of ever

doing it. If they want to do it, they will come. That's up to the people who give the exhibition. If they have enough interest to give me the exhibition, I think it's up to them to do something about the rest. Because after all, they are charging a commission for the work, and I think it's part of their duty. It's not up to the artist to go around blowing his horn to get a crit.

SMITH: Did you do any pieces that were related to the Vietnam War?

WAGNER: Yeah, a couple. I did a rocket in a glass cylinder with some metal pieces I found in a dump in Rocketdyne that looked like rocket pieces. Up to a point. And I had a whole army of soldiers inside, all trapped and encased in this penis of glass. Yeah, that was one.

I did one on peace in Navaho, Yiddish, Spanish, French, English, and German within hands clasped together, trying to pull together from all of the different races of people, the red, the yellow, the black, the brown and the white.

SMITH: Was this a box or a construction?

WAGNER: This was a box. There were a few.

SMITH: Then you were involved in some things concerning the American Indians.

WAGNER: The America Needs Indians.

SMITH: How did you get involved in that? Where did that come from?

WAGNER: Well, there were a lot of people that I knew, like Steve Durke and Dion Wright, Walter Chappell in North Beach. That's where it really got going, North Beach. Actually, the name of the group was the Love Generator and America Needs Indians. This was to do something to help the American Indians, who were being absolutely torn apart by the white man at that time. When the hippie movement came along, well, everybody wanted to be an Indian, so naturally it brought the Indian into fame. Of course, the hippies went to the Hopis. The hippies at the Hopi [reservation were] running around nude, and the Hopis, being very conservative people, never heard of such things. They didn't have as much love for the hippies as the hippies had for the Hopis. The Navahos didn't have much to do with the whole thing. They went to the Plains; they went to Rolling Thunder, up in Nevada or wherever he is, on the border there. Rolling Thunder and a few Hopis--

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SMITH: Ok, you were were saying Rolling Thunder--

WAGNER: Yeah, and a few Hopis, like David Monongi, Jack the Snake Priest, and Tom [Thomas] Banyakia, and some of those people, they took a liking to the hippies. They saw that the hippies were nice kids with money. It was either going into the Hopis or going into some yogi group. They were cashing in like mad. All of them coming over here from India making fortunes off of the hippies. Well, David, Thomas, and Jack, and a few of these boys, they were the conservative party of the Hopi, but they were the most progressive of the two clans. They knew when they had a good thing going. So they'd go off to these love-ins, and the Hopis would be the center of attention. They weren't using Plains Indians, the Hopis came to love-ins. And Rolling Thunder. I guess he was, I don't know, up in--

SMITH: Lake Pyramid?

WAGNER: Up in Nevada. What is that, Comanche or one of those--

SMITH: Shoshone or Washoe.

WAGNER: One of those things, Washoe Valley, around there. [coughs; tape recorder off]

SMITH: So you were talking about, before we took a break, about the Love Generator.

WAGNER: Well, we were talking about a particular part there. At that time, I think we were mentioning David Monongi and that group of Indians who were connected up with the--knew all of these people we're talking about: Steve Durke, who had the Lama Foundation in Lama, New Mexico; and Dion Wright, who was the head of the Brotherhood of Man in Laguna Beach and the Mystic Arts World with [Timothy] Leary; and Walter Chappell, who was a filmmaker, and a good one, who lived in Pilar, New Mexico. And then there was Henry [Harry] Hay and John-- John, what was his last name?

SMITH: Burnside, you mean.

WAGNER: John Burnside. They were all involved in TILL [Committee for Traditional Indian Land and Life], which was another organization, the Traditional Indian Land and Life committee, who were trying to help the Hopis and other Indians, especially around New Mexico and Arizona. An omnibus bill was trying to be passed that would remove the land from the Indians and slowly take away their reservation. They went to Washington, D.C., and they battled this thing out in Washington. They saved that from being passed. Henry Hay and Craig Carpenter, who was basically with Rolling Thunder up north, the two of them were working together. But Henry Hay lived in San Juan pueblo, and John, and they were trying-- The last I saw of

them, they were trying-- The state of Texas was trying to claim all of the Rio Grande, right on up through New Mexico, all the water rights. Henry Hay was out trying to put across to the Pueblos that live all along the Rio Grande that they've got to do something about using that water in some way, such as for growing rabbit brush and things like this for their animals, so that they have to rely on that water, a reason for using it. But the Indians weren't using that river at all. It could have been taken away from New Mexico, the whole water rights of the Rio Grande. I think he fought that; that never came about.

TILL was an organization, Love Generator, America Needs Indians; all of this came together as a group to sort of make the Indian a hero in America, rather than a bum, like he'd been treated for years, as a ward of the government.

SMITH: Were you attending the meetings?

WAGNER: Yeah, I used to go to the meetings.

SMITH: On a regular basis?

WAGNER: Yeah, just about every month. We published a magazine even, a little book that was written, the **Prophecy of the Hopi** by Chief-- What was his name? Dan Bear, you know, Chief [Dan] K'achongva. We put that book all together, Detta Lange and Hannes Lange, Charles Port from Immaculate Heart College. We had the meetings at

Immaculate Heart College on Franklin [Avenue] and Western [Avenue] in their auditorium. Lots of Indians would come, and they would dance, and they would do all these things, and they would bring all their culture to L.A. through that. So it was a big thing. Everybody was buying Indian jewelry, and everybody had to be an Indian. My aspect of the thing was I just loved the Indians' being there, but I wasn't romanticizing Indians through their trappings and things. I was romanticizing Indians through my boxes and constructions and earlier paintings, perhaps. I was a natural for being in that group.

SMITH: Well, it doesn't sound too typical of you to be going to political organizations' meetings.

WAGNER: Well, this was beyond the call of duty. [laughter] I went there because I loved the Indians, and I didn't want to see them-- The Bureau of Indian Affairs, they were a bunch of puppets, and they were really against the Indians. They were Indians who were against the Indians. I thought it was-- I never really became involved that much in any politics. But it wasn't really politics to me, it was sort of restoring a culture and being part of keeping this restoration from being destroyed. Instead of tearing down a Victorian house and putting up a condo, that same kind of flavor to the American Indian: it was a thing of elegance, a thing of beauty, a thing of love, a thing

that we cherished from nature. And to have it destroyed for coal and oil and junk, and taking away the land to put up the poverty-stricken shacks to make the place look like some tenement instead of an Indian community, I wasn't ready to accept that kind of metamorphosis.

SMITH: How was your artwork-- Were you doing what they call agitprop type of artwork connected with this? Were you doing anything through your art to help the Traditional Indian Land and Life committee or the other organizations?

WAGNER: Yeah, I made a few drawings for their magazines and bulletins, and things of that nature, related to protest. Hands reaching up through the mud, prayer hands with the light above, trying to grope for the last light. Smoke and smog and corruption, and debris in the desert, and debris in the mountains that is being just dumped out there in nature. A different kind of debris than good old junk. And shooting up everything that they saw; white man goes to the dump to shoot everything and fill it with holes; not to collect it for a beautiful, insignificant object, a thing of beauty, but to puncture it full of holes with his rifle. That's all the desert is for as far as white man is concerned. I did make one piece related to that with an Indian holding up a whole mountain of debris that's just destroying the landscape, and wrecked cars. It's called **America Needs Indians**, or the other title is I

Think We Ought to Stop This Sort of Thing.

SMITH: That would explain why-- That piece seems unusual in the kind of materials you used, those kinds of cheap, plastic, like Lego kind of toys, but they're not--

WAGNER: That was actually that way when I found it in the dump. Everything had been melted together, and it became a wonderful piece of metamorphosis. Every kind of object in there just fused together. I had no control over what the dump did to that piece. I used that piece as a statement protesting the pollution of our deserts and our mountains and our environment with the American Indian as the last symbol of let's not do any more, let's stop.

SMITH: Is that a time-full piece or a timeless piece?

WAGNER: Well, I think it would be time-full, but so far it's on time. As long as we have this continuing environmental pollution, and the way it's going now, it'll still be timeless.

SMITH: Harry Hay in his oral history interview mentions that the Traditional Land and Life committee was primarily Anglos, white people.

WAGNER: That's correct, except for a few Hopis that I mentioned, like David. They had to have some Indians.

SMITH: Yeah. Was America Needs Indians primarily white people as well, Anglos?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, I would say that

most of them were artists.

SMITH: Did you go on any protests, like to Washington or the Federal Building, or anything like that?

WAGNER: No. I heard a story--I don't know how true it is, but I got it from a firsthand report from David, that they went to Washington about the omnibus bill, and they were talking to some senator about it. The senator was denying them everything, and David said, "Well, if you pass, if you even think about passing this bill, your eyes are going to be filled with spider's poison." And he [the senator] says, "See what I mean? We have to confront these kind of idiots, these kind of superstitious creatures who are telling us--" And at that time the man grabbed his eyes, "Oooh!" He couldn't see a thing.

SMITH: You don't know who they were talking to. It was a senator?

WAGNER: I don't know which one. No, this was a story I heard from David. But I also hear from David stories about how they go to a certain place in Arizona once a year to watch the flying saucers land. [laughter] Then they all go, the whole group, to a special place to visit the flying saucers, and they get their prophecies there. Because they say that the Gourd of Ash will fall, and we must pray every day to stop the Gourd of Ash from falling on the earth.

SMITH: About this time you were also involved with Yogi

Bhajan? How did you meet-- You met him in New Mexico?

WAGNER: No, I met him right here in Los Angeles at the East-West Cultural Center. One evening I was going to a lecture by a Sufi master, and I immediately took a dislike to him. My wife talked to him, Virginia, he said, "I can teach you to raise your kundalini in five days." Virginia became fascinated by that, and she went down to his classes at the East-West. Everybody was on the floor (there were only four people there in his first class). Edith Tyberg was the director there, a great lady. About two weeks later Yogi Bhajan told Virginia, "Your husband couldn't come to my class for all the money in the world." And I sent a note back to him through Virginia saying, "I wouldn't come to your class for all the money in the world." This went on and on until finally we were--I was talked into attending. We got to be friends, you know. He treated me all right. As a matter of fact, at that moment when I came, about two weeks later, everybody came, whole busloads of hippies from the Hog Farm in New Mexico. There was John Law, the actor, and Tom Law, his brother, and Reno. A lot of actresses that were in the Smothers Brothers Show. Goldie. All these kind of people showed up.

SMITH: Goldie Hawn?

WAGNER: No. What was her name? They called her Goldie.

She was one of the hippie girls on the Smothers Brothers. The Smothers Brothers even showed up in their Rolls Royce. What was his name, Tommy Smothers?

SMITH: Tom Smothers and Dick Smothers.

WAGNER: Anyway, they came, and we got people like Barrymore, Jr., John Barrymore, Jr., who was an old dopehead. We got Jim Baker, who ran that restaurant on Sunset Boulevard. Jim Baker was an ex-Marine jujitsu champion of the world. He ran a health food restaurant on Sunset Boulevard. We had all of these people. Jules Boucharie turned over an ashram to him behind his antique shop on Robertson [Boulevard] and-- What's the one? I can't remember the street.

SMITH: Melrose [Avenue]?

WAGNER: Melrose and Robertson, yeah, near Cyrano's down a block or two. All of these things started going on. Johnny Rivers, he came along, bought him a new Cadillac, a pink Cadillac. He lived in Jules Boucharie's house, and he ran his whole thing. I made him a big gong stand, and I did a lot of-- I made him mandalas. I worked pretty hard for him for about seven or eight months. I was going every night to study with him.

SMITH: Kundalini yoga?

WAGNER: Yeah. And then finally he-- We used to take him-- We got him classes all over the place. Everyplace, we'd

take him. He loved Mexican food. He was an airport inspector in New Delhi. But he loved Mexican food. He was so arrogant to people, the most arrogant man I have ever known in my life. But he was always nice to me. He told me once, he said, [with accent] "I think you're a more holy man than I am, Gordon." Anyway, we used to have great parties, lots of food, feasts with all these people. The Hog Farm did great things to help, you know, to bring the spirit. A whole community from New Mexico. Truches is where they came from.

SMITH: Truches?

WAGNER: Truches. That's where they were, back in the mountain, Sangre de Cristo. Then they had another group in Embudo, wonderful girls there. They were all beautiful, hippies. And they just loved it, they ate it up, you see. They'd been into the Indian thing before, I mean American Indian. They just switched over to Yogi Bhajan like that. Yogi was strong, powerful. He'd put you through grueling, horrible tests of strength every night.

SMITH: Like what?

WAGNER: Yoga exercises that you just couldn't imagine. Standing on one hand, balanced on two feet, the other arm up in the air and fire breathing for fifty breaths, and then switch over to the other one on this hand. And up and this way out, just like this.

SMITH: Your feet would be lifted in the air?

WAGNER: No, they'd be on the floor. You ran one arm up and this one like this, and fire breathe, [repeats very quick breaths] real fast to raise your kundalini. Well, this went on and on. Finally, Virginia went on to tai chi. I was not that interested-- He even had me teaching a class, when he was in New Mexico, at Pitzer College. I had to teach the class. And it was-- We just went to New York one day, and we never-- He wanted to make me the treasurer of the group, 3HO it was called, Healthy, Happy, Holy. John Law was the president, and I was going to be the treasurer, I can't remember his name, but he was the editor and owner of the [San Francisco] Oracle magazine.

SMITH: In San Francisco?

WAGNER: Both, here L.A. [Los Angeles] Oracle, and San Francisco. I can't remember his name now, but he was going to be the secretary. None of us were ever going to do anything; it was just a name so we could have a nonprofit organization. Yogi was-- He told me he was going to get the benefit of everything. He had all these women around him all the time. But we left.

SMITH: Why did you leave?

WAGNER: It was too much. And he really hurt Virginia's back. Pulled her down on his stomach and pressed into her spine. Tried to damage her. And he said, "It doesn't

matter where you go. I don't understand how you escape from my net, but just remember the elephant has a very long trunk, and no matter where you are, we'll snatch you back," over the telephone. Well, then he moved to New Mexico, up to Española. He's been out there, I guess, all the time. He raises some kind of special horses, and there's a whole bunch of them there, with guns and rifles to protect themselves against the Spanish. An interesting concept. But he never bothered me.

SMITH: What's the interesting concept?

WAGNER: Well, the whole, this ranch and this idea of his. He never bothered me. He bothered so many people. He caused harm to so many people. We came out unscathed.

SMITH: So you were teaching at Pitzer for a while?

WAGNER: Yeah, I was teaching there at that time, as a matter of fact.

SMITH: How did you get that job?

WAGNER: Carl Hertel went on a sabbatical, and he asked me if I would take over during that time. I said only under one condition: that I can come and go as I please and have my class and never attend any meetings. So that was arranged.

SMITH: Had you taught at a major university before, at an art department in a major university before?

WAGNER: Not really, no.

SMITH: Community college and community art centers.

WAGNER: Yeah, things like that, and art centers.

SMITH: Did you enjoy-- Did you find teaching at an art school was different? Was it enjoyable to you?

WAGNER: Well, there's-- You know the people at an art school are interested in art and are there for that, whereas in a college they have a lot of other things on their minds, other schedules to keep and other classes to bring up to date on for grades and points, and all that, you know. Art is-- If you were going to learn about art, I would say that that would be the last place you would want to go, Pitzer College. I mean, there are so many good schools I think that could give you art. Of course, I had a very good--I had good classes going, because I was the only one teaching what I was teaching in all of the colleges. I was teaching assemblage and three-dimensional construction combined with painting. And design, I had one class in design, and the other-- So that brought in students from Pomona [College] and Scripps [College] and Claremont [McKenna College] and Harvey Mudd [College] and Pitzer; I had all the colleges, students from each one. I was amazed at the beautiful work they really did, you know. We had a wonderful time doing it.

SMITH: Many artists in Southern California, and I'm sure everywhere, have been able to support themselves by getting

jobs, teaching jobs, at the University of California or the state colleges. Long Beach State [California State University, Long Beach], Fullerton [California State University, Fullerton], [University of California] Santa Barbara. Why didn't you settle into a teaching job, a faculty teaching job?

WAGNER: Because basically, that's what you become. You become a teacher instead of an artist. It's a trap, and you can get caught in it. I know a lot of artists who teach art, but they're always complaining that they have no time for their artwork because they're so involved in their schedules to teach. They may teach three days a week or something, but in the meantime they're preparing for the next four days for those three days, you know. I think it actually takes a lot out of any serious artist who wants to be an artist to have to take time out to teach. Plus the fact that, not being a person of organizations like that, meetings, and being told this and to do that and get this done, and orders and regulations to follow, all those kind of disciplines, I'd rather just follow my own disciplines and work in my studio and get along the best I can and teach in a place where you have students, but if you don't have the students, you don't have the class sort of feeling, like art centers and whatnot. Money-- If you want to be an artist, I think you have to be one. I know there

are some good artists that are teachers. They wait for their sabbatical when they can do their work. But I know so many of them, that's all they do is teach; they never have exhibitions, they never work, and they never get anything done, you know. And when they do something, it's eclectic to everybody else because they can't follow their way long enough. Too exhausting.

SMITH: How were you supporting yourself in the late sixties, early seventies?

WAGNER: That's barely making it in the late sixties. Fortunately, Virginia has a wonderful ability to teach the Alexander technique. She had private students, she would have maybe four or five a week--no, four or five a day, sometimes, maybe three times a week. That paid the bills. And I would sell something sometimes. I taught a little bit, or I'd be asked to give a lecture. Some kind of thing always came along; I never worried about it. But if I think back about it, it was a good cushion with Virginia, because she financed things pretty well for us, kept it there. But back in those days, there was a boom in the arts, you know. I was selling a lot of works. I was selling boxes for $2,000, $3,000 per box. Somebody would come along and give me $6,000 for a couple of boxes.

SMITH: [Silvan] Simone was handling your boxes or [Robert] Comara?

WAGNER: No, none-- That was in the late seventies--no, I mean the early seventies. No.

SMITH: Who was handling your boxes?

WAGNER: At that time it was Molly Barnes and Jacqueline Anhalt [Gallery] on La Cienega [Boulevard]. They sold a few for me. Then I was invited to a lot of exhibitions. I showed some works in the Orlando Gallery, they sold some works for me, in the [San Fernando] Valley. I used to get by, but I was never rich. I enjoyed comfortable poverty, and we lived in Echo Park. Finally, they raised our rent to $200 a month for this big house on two and a half acres of land. It started at $80, and it went up slowly over a period of nineteen years, it progressed up to $200. That was in '78, I think, when they kicked us out. That's when we moved. They sold the house.

SMITH: When did you go to Europe?

WAGNER: Nineteen seventy-one.

SMITH: How did that come about?

WAGNER: I was talking with Arthur Secunda, and he'd had an exhibition in a gallery in Uppsala, Konstsalongen Kavalletin, of assemblages. He had 104 works in the exhibition, and he sold 108, of assemblage. So he said, "You should have a show there. I'll write to Herbert and see what we can do." He wrote a letter, and Herbert answered me.

SMITH: Herbert who?

WAGNER: The director, Herbert Ahlquist.

SMITH: Ahlquist?

WAGNER: He was the owner. He wrote a letter back and said, "You can have an exhibition in October of the next year."

And I said, "October, that's pretty good."

Arthur said, "That's perfect. It's not too dark, and it's not too light. It's just right. You'll like it that time of the year."

I wrote him back and said I'd do it. So I did it. I sent forty-two boxes there, boxes that were--they weren't fabricated boxes, they were still assemblage and some fetish pieces and images, and of that mandalic form.

SMITH: Things like **Mexican Bus**?

WAGNER: Similar to that period. Forty-two of them in a crate, flew them over there to Stockholm. We took off, and we went ourselves. We arrived there I think it was about September 30, and the show was going to open on October 2. We got there and everything was fine, and I hung the whole exhibition. They had the opening, posters all over the town and the city, and great kiosks. It was beautiful. A nice man. And they sold quite a few pieces for me out of that show. The only problem, he said they would have sold twenty times more, but the teachers were on

strike and they had no money at that time. The University of Uppsala, which is an old university, one of the oldest in the world, I think. That's how I started, that was my first show in Europe.

SMITH: How long did you stay in Sweden?

WAGNER: A couple of months. Then I was invited to have an exhibition in the museum, in a place called Södertälje [Konsthall], which is in Stockholm. But that would be the following year, so I had no immediate plans [about] what to do with this work. Winter was there, and I didn't know where to put it, you know. The whole crate went out into Herbert's storage shed. I figured, well, it's going to freeze, you know. I don't know what happens to art when there's no heat, no nothing, just out in the freezing shed. I don't know if glass breaks or what. I had no conception. So we finally-- I made lots of friends in Sweden, some of my great friends, like Jan Thunholm, Björn Evanson, Nils Stenquist. A lot, all artists.

SMITH: Was there assemblage work being done in Sweden at the time?

WAGNER: Yeah. Yeah, there was, by Jan Thunholm, he was one, and Jan Björn, he was another one.

SMITH: How did Swedish assemblage differ from California assemblage?

WAGNER: Well, basically, they painted it all. They bought

wood, cut it out, sawed it, nailed it on, and stood it up and painted the colors.

SMITH: So they were fabricated pieces, then, instead of the found pieces.

WAGNER: Yeah. Sawed out, randomly sawed out. Björn Evanson did big gates for the city of Stockholm, like pie, you know, of bronzes and things; he used car parts and things; he would weld them into his steel. He lived on one of the islands right there just south of a place called-- My memory is so bad for these times. But a wonderful place. He had a studio right on the water. There's a community. It's right there off of the islands. The ships went right by his house; on the Baltic, beautiful. Anyway, after about two months we left. I studied there with an engraver and made some etchings.

SMITH: Had you studied etching before?

WAGNER: No, no. They invited me to do some etchings. His name was Eje Lönn. He was a wonderful old guy. He taught me the Rembrandt technique of etching. He was marvelous.

SMITH: How have you used the etching?

WAGNER: Oh, I just made them there. I just made a couple of etchings, just for the feeling of it.

SMITH: Like that box there that has the line--

WAGNER: That's a drawing.

SMITH: Yeah, it has an etching feeling.

WAGNER: Well, I drew that etching on the same stock, on the asphaltem.

SMITH: Had you done that kind of draftsmanship before, previous to that?

WAGNER: Yeah. He was such a wonderful old man with a long beard and a funny, old blue seaman's cap he always wore. He would laugh, joke. He gave me that pointed long stick right here with the dull point that looks like a piece of bamboo. He said, "You take that back to America. You work with that, that is part of my father's fishing pole when he died." I liked him a lot.

When we left there we went to London. We were going to London for a week, and we stayed for almost six months. Then the next thing was when is the exhibition going to be, to be sure that it was going to be held in the museum, in Södertälje, and at what time. The complications of getting it somewhere after that to a new destination. So the only thing I could do was-- When we arrived in London, I said, "This looks like a place for my art." I was like Gully Jimson, you know, looking for big surfaces to paint on. But I said, "With the British wit and the number of art establishments and galleries and museums in this city, there certainly must be someplace for my work." Well, that took a while. It took a lot of walking and learning about London, which is a marvelous city when

you know where you're going. At first we stayed in some hotel next to where Virginia Woolf lived, Bloomsbury Street. We just wanted to get into the flavor of the Bloomsbury crowd, Dorothy Brett, Virginia Woolf, and all those ladies. Then we decided that wasn't the place, so we moved across the town to Victoria, over next to the Waterloo--or next to the Victoria Station. That was near the Alexander Center, where Virginia wanted to go to study with the master, right there at Victoria Station. So we found an old hotel over there, and they gave us a cheap rate up on the top floor. We stayed there for about two or three weeks. In the meantime, I'm out pounding the pavement for the first time in my life looking to see what I could find in the way of a gallery in London. That wasn't so easy to find. I'd go to these galleries and they'd say, [with British accent] "It's so wonderful, it's charming, it's beautiful. It's a pity you're not English, you're American." They would turn me off on that score. This went on and on and on; I must have contacted twenty-five, thirty galleries. But I learned about London. I learned how to walk in London, how to get there the shortest way, and how to take tubes, the underground. Now I'm equally at home in London as I am here, you know, in Southern California, where I was born. Natural-- Just a hamlet, really, but it seems such a massive place when

you-- We moved to another place where it said "room" on George Street. I did drawings and things along the way of all these places. Looking at drawings of some of my black and whites, of my Under the Crown series, I was drawing all the time. Probably we moved to another place on George Street, which was about palatable for three days. An awful place, just gruesome when we got inside and looked at the rooms, the bathroom all full of water on the floor and the windows all sagging and broken. The housekeeper, she was a nice lady. I think she was Spanish. With her tattooed spider on her elbow.

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SMITH: Well, when we left off last week, you had come to London in 1971 for two weeks and stayed six months. You had mentioned afterwards that your stay in London was the beginning of a major transformation in your work--and your life, I guess. Could you explain what you meant by that?
WAGNER: Well, when I arrived in London, in the railroad station, Liverpool Street Station especially, from crossing over from Holland and taking the train to Liverpool Street, I walked into this station, it was so incredible, the ironwork and the mystery of it. I'd never seen a railroad station like that anywhere. It went way back; all the curlicues and all of the imagery. I was sort of dazed at the city. I had no idea where I was. I knew it was supposed to be the largest city in the world populationwise at that time. Apparently people had told me what a great city it was, but I had no conception of it. When we picked up the cab and went the wrong way on the streets, well, then I knew I was in a different place. As I looked at the people all around me, I realized they were from a different place. They weren't like us at all, the British, all different people, their faces, everything about them. And being there as a viewer to this was quite impressive. And also depressing. I went through all sorts of emotions at

first. I realized that the people in London are not rich; there are lots of poor people there that live on very little money to keep things going. But they all have that wonderful spark of humor down inside of them and that eccentricity, which keeps everything going very healthily.

They live almost in the past; they talk about things that happened four hundred years ago like it happened yesterday. They are very much interested in the royalty, the kings and the queens and all of the-- Buckingham Palace and all of that royal pomp is almost like a fetish to these people. They can't give up that admiration, or that feeling, for these royalty, who actually, really haven't much power in the politics in the country, but they're there. The people wait for them in parades, on the streets, for the queen to appear in a carriage. If she waves at them, then it's going to bring them good luck for the whole year. There's so much of that. So looking around London, visiting galleries and trying to get myself going-- Taking my works from Sweden to London, somehow I thought the people of London would really appreciate what I was doing because they have that humor, and they have that childlike ability to really accept it. They're sweet people, and I thought that it was a possibility for galleries to be interested. As I think we already mentioned, I went from one gallery to another.

SMITH: What were you showing to these galleries? What were you taking to show them, what did you propose to--

WAGNER: I wasn't taking anything but slides. My work was all-- The physical work was still in Sweden.

SMITH: Right, but what works were you--

WAGNER: Boxes. Boxes. That was it. Of the period that I had in Sweden, my older pieces.

SMITH: So they were funk boxes?

WAGNER: Yeah, funk boxes. As I say, they loved it, but it was too bad that I was an American. "You're not British," they would tell me. I stayed on and looked at things and started making a series of drawings that I call Under The Crown, because I realized all of this royalty, all of this elegance, and all of these heraldic symbols and chance were all wonderful images and symbols for my work to come. It was like empires balanced on a dice cube, or a whole empire balanced on a knife edge with the king and the queen in folly. There was always this chance that it was going to fall down, like a playing card castle. Playing cards. All these things became symbols. Dice cubes. All this imagery. It was all like symbols of chance, the aleatory. And I used those in drawings. I started drawing all of these things out in my rooms where we would spend time while we were--in the evening I would just sit and draw until I fell asleep.

The thing that was a very amusing situation, I remember asking so many galleries, and everyone had the same answer, all liking my work, but always the same answer, "Oh, you're not British." I finally was sent to the British Arts Council to meet with Peter Byrd, who was the head of the British Arts Council, to get some recommendations of what he thought might happen. The way I found him out was there was a Swedish artist by the name of Brigit Skjöberg on Carlyle Street, who was a printmaker from Sweden and she married Peter Byrd. She'd recommended me to see him, her husband. He told me that the only place I should really go is the American embassy and meet up with a gentleman there who is the head of the cultural affairs by the name of Bernard Lang. So he said, "You might just as well go to the people that represent your country, they can help you." So I went to Grosvenor Square, to the embassy. I called him first, made an appointment and went there. Meeting with Bernard was an odd thing. Bernard was an Englishman. He'd been to America once, to a space exhibition in Florida, and that was about as far into the United States as he'd ever ventured. He lived in Hampton Court and knew everybody in the world, I think. He'd organized exhibitions for Ed [Edward] Kienholz and Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly, Ad Reinhardt, and many of the artists from New York, in the American embassy. They had--

the whole downstairs, when you walked in, of the American embassy was a gallery with great paintings and small paintings. He had it sectioned off so that it could be in smaller galleries with a fountain in the center. That was what he was doing, he was showing American artists, and he was also working with actors, poets, anybody from the arts that came to London or England. It was sort of his responsibility to be the liaison and coordinator between the whole thing. So my first appointment with Bernard, I took slides and background, and he took me to his office upstairs. He said, [with British accent] "Very well, Gordon. You like it here in London?"

And I said, "I've only been here a short time, but I'm finding it to be a nice place."

"Well, I'm glad you like it," he says. "We have lots of things going, you know." And he said, "Are you hungry?"

And I said, "Yeah, I haven't had any lunch."

And he says, " Well, come along." So he took me down into the bottom of the embassy to the cafeteria, where we had lunch. He proceeded to tell me about the American embassy and how all of the eccentrics almost had disappeared from the embassy and that it was getting rather dull. The last director went off with one year of unanswered mail, back to America. They set him off on a

ship back to New York--or Washington. He was dictating letters as he went to the ones he hadn't answered in one year. We were there for two hours, talking, and he was telling me about the Vauxhall generals and about everything in England.

Finally, we went back to the office and he says, "Incidentally, Gordon, what was it that you wanted to see me about?" That was three o'clock in the afternoon. From eleven to three. I was-- I said, "Bernard, what I really wanted to talk to you about is an exhibition that I had up in Sweden, in Uppsala, and it's going on to Södertälje [Konsthall], Stockholm, in the museum. And I'm looking for a place--I thought this city would like to share with me what I do."

"Oh, very well," he says. "We'll make an appointment. You come back next week, same time, same place, and we'll go through that." So another whole week went by not making any progress whatsoever. I looked a little more; I walked through the whole city of London; I know it by heart. But the more I walked through it, and the more I looked at the art I did see, it was a stimulating thing. In the museums I found, like the National Galleries with all the masters, a wonderful box by Samuel van Hoogstraten, who was an artist from Antwerp who created an environment about three feet square and about

eighteen inches high. You looked through a hole and you saw this man with his dog in a corridor, and you went to the other hole and you saw a different scene, and it was all mirrors and painted.

SMITH: Seventeenth-century artist, eighteenth century?

WAGNER: Yeah, he was at the time of Rembrandt, a very early boxmaker.

SMITH: Had you been aware of him at all?

WAGNER: No, never heard of him. He only made five pieces that they can account for. I was really quite stimulated by what I was looking at there, the illusion, and painting with the illusion. So I let it go. I went back to a few places. I used to come out of the museums feeling like I was oh, about an eighth of an inch high, you know, after all-- It's good for your humility to go to museums of the great masters. Your ego disintegrates way, way down. Well, maybe my work's not so good, maybe I better think about something here, perfecting this or changing this and doing it a little differently. The other reason for that being that I was in desperation for money at that time. I was living on about ten to twelve pounds a week, which would be about normal for a lot of people. That's what schoolteachers were getting, which was equivalent at that time to about thirty-five dollars. During that exchange, at that moment, the pound was about $2.60. Well, I got to

thinking about these things somehow subconsciously; however it worked out I'm not sure, but within my head were the drawings and what I was seeing and feeling from the masters. There was a transition going on within my head to become more narrative in what I'm doing and sort of move out of the fetish and the abstract. I had one gallery that I found that was interested in my work, and he kept--

SMITH: Which gallery was that?

WAGNER: The Prudhoe Gallery, Raymond Prudhoe on Duke Street. He made no commitments, but he was interested in having my works. He was English, but he lived in New York and ran a clothing store in New York, some big store. His wife was a very rich woman from Spain who financed the gallery. Another man who I couldn't pin down, but he really liked my works tremendously, was a Frenchman by the name of Jean-Pierre Lehman. He had the Archer Gallery off of Bond Street. So those two hopes kept me dangling in London. It kept going, and I went back to Bernard: "Oh, wonderfully interesting, Gordon, you come again. I love it; I love what you're doing. Maybe we can arrange something for you." Let's see, that was in October. In February I was still waiting for some kind of a commitment from somewhere. Nothing was happening, and I'd been through all these wonderful experiences of the British, and I was drawing, and I started to make boxes myself. I made

boxes from things I found in the back alleys. For the boxes themselves, I would go to the timber merchant and buy my wood. And walk. Walk and walk and walk. I carried wood on my back and glass to the glazier. I learned a whole lot of things about the British culture from becoming involved like this, actually living in the environment. We moved to Golders Green, which is sort of like where the Jewish people are of England; it's mostly all Jewish. It's near the Hampstead Heath, so I could walk on the Heath. I lived in the attic in the house of Kenneth Lloyd on Golders Green Crescent. It was a circular street right off from the tube, about a block away from the tube, so it was handy to go to London. The next street over was Golders Green, the whole community, so the stores were close at hand. It was a marvelous place to live, very convenient. It was about twenty minutes to London on the Northern Line. In the meantime, I met up with a lady there by the name of-- At the Camden Art Center-- Anyway--

SMITH: It'll come to you.

WAGNER: She was the director. Janice, Janice [Jackson] was her name. Well, I liked her a lot, and she liked me. So she invited Virginia and I to come out to her house in Perry Green in Much Hadham. She had a thatched-roof house, a real English thatched-roof house with walls of all the flint stones; beautiful house. She invited Virginia and I

to come for lunch. She said, "Just go to the Liverpool Street Station, get off at Bishop Stortford, and we'll be there to pick you up." I thought that would be a nice trip, so we did that. When we got over there, she had this wonderful house. After we had this marvelous meal, she said, "Would you like to walk on the moors?"

I said, "I've been waiting to walk on the moors all my life." It was a dream to walk on the moors. Very romantic.

"Well," she said, "It's not exactly that kind of moors, it's Henry Moore's; he lives across the street."

So I said, "That sounds like a good thing to do." So we walked out, and right across from her little road on the other side was a big barn. It was a studio filled with his sculpture and with people working on big pieces. From Alsace-Lorraine, I remember, one of the men; I talked to him. Then we went on down and kept going to different buildings where he had other things going on, cast and stone and a lot of maquettes. We kept on walking, and down over this rail, English turnstile gate, we stepped over the fence down into a sort of ravine. She says, "The principal reason for visiting here today, because there's a dump down there, and I think you might find some good things." Janice Jackson. Husband's name was Errol Jackson, who did all the photography for Henry Moore, did everything for his

catalogs and-- So they were really close friends.

So we went down there and I found a lot of very good pieces that I could use, objects and things, old things. We came back with about four dustbags full, you know, like plastic, like they throw--they call them the dustmen, they don't call them the trashmen--dustbags, plastic sack. So we had about four almost full, and we were carrying them up over the hill, all this equipment. Then we went into Henry Moore's studio, where he worked personally. It was a very small room--I wouldn't say it was more than fifteen by sixteen feet total--with a window that looked out over his meadow where he had all these sheep grazing. He used to sit at the window and draw the sheep when they'd come up to the window. That's when he did his sheep-drawing series, all from the studio window. Then he had all these small pieces of rock, flint, and he'd add plaster to them and tie them. He was working things out for large pieces. But everything-- There was nothing there bigger than probably about eight inches by eight; it was small pieces that he worked on first, and then they would blow those up. It was an interesting studio. His printmaking studio was a huge, atriumlike studio connected to his house, where he did all of his etchings. It was a beautiful acreage; he must have had sixty, seventy acres of land there.

So bringing the junk back to London, on the train--

We rode in a train that time that was--the car we got into was one of those short ones, you know, about four seats this way and four this way and in between. A little one. It was all right. We got back to the Liverpool Street Station, and then transferred the junk from the Liverpool Street Station to the Central Line, and then transferred from the Central Line at Oxford Circus to take the Northern Line. Walking through the tubes carrying all this junk was an experience that I won't forget. But it was an experience that made me feel more like I was part of that culture. Here's all this empire, but people are like this-- Royalty is operating the whole thing, but there's all these people doing all these things like ants, striving-- There's junkmen, there's junk dealers, there's horse and wagons, there's still, on the street, men selling cockles and whelks, and there's [people] collecting newspapers. It's a place-- England is such a sophisticated culture and so primitive at the same time. It's both ways. This is the thing that really hit me at that point, how much I loved the place because I could do all this; I could get on the tube with fifty people, on the underground, on the subway, and ride along with all my junk next to some elegant lady, next to some old character in a top hat, next to some other old man, like a wino, freezing to death. All this conglomerate of people together. I

couldn't get away with that very much anywhere else; England I could. Because in the first place-- Bobbies there don't carry guns, they only say good day. It's a whole different social system.

So I took all this stuff back to Golders Green and hauled it up into my attic. I found things there that started me out in the direction of found things in a narrative way; not fabricated, found things in a narrative way. An example of that would be that box that I had called the **Hilltown Fire Brigade**, where the fire engine is a found fire engine, the pump is a found pump of something else, and the monkey running the pumper and the man up in the firebox trying to put the fire out with the hose that has no water. This was in the Angel's Gate [Cultural Center] exhibition; it's owned by Marylyn Ginsberg.

SMITH: That was made out of what you found in England?

WAGNER: Yeah. Yeah. I found a lock this big around. Then I built a jail, like a prison, with bars, and I had a poor little figure behind this in this medieval door, gate, like she was locked in the prison and couldn't get out. The key was way down on the bottom, so she could never reach the key for the house to get it open. She was holding the bars. That was from my experience with the Tower of London. I was feeling all of this world of the British.

SMITH: What you did in **Hilltown Fire Brigade**, how do you distinguish that from what you were doing in, say, **Mexican Bus**?

WAGNER: Well, the Mexican box was right along with that, about that time. You mean the **Mexican Bus**?

SMITH: **Mexican Bus**, that's four years earlier.

WAGNER: Yeah, that's right. I was still in that period, you see. Four years later I was still working with found objects, narrative. Yeah.

SMITH: What about **Three Faces of a Child**? That's a box, a fabricated box, that you made in the same year as **Hilltown Fire Brigade**. Is that one of your earliest fabricated boxes?

WAGNER: That's a very early one, because-- What year was that?

SMITH: Nineteen seventy-three.

WAGNER: It was just in the beginning of changing over. That one was-- The actual cabinet I made. The child's face is looking in the three mirrors, and around inside-- It's a beveled mirror, but each mirror has a different face. But it's the same child. Going back it looks like a child, but it's a young girl, a middle-aged girl and old lady, gnarled. Almost looking like the British women, some of them. They get very gnarled, the older ones.

SMITH: Did you do that in England?

WAGNER: No, but it was conceived there. I drew it up there with the idea in my sketchbook to do it sometime. See, some of the pieces I conceived in England, I didn't build them until I got back to America. Many that I built in England are in Belgium. They're still over there, I never brought them home. About maybe twenty of them I built in England were either sold in Belgium or are still in a gallery there.

SMITH: I wanted to ask you about aleatory art. Had you used playing cards or dice imagery in your work before?

WAGNER: No. No, I hadn't. I got into that through heraldry. Looking at heraldry between Sweden and England and Belgium and the Flemish painters. Way back to Bosch and Brueghel, they used playing cards even. The images-- It's a nice symbol, playing cards, from the aleatory standpoint.

SMITH: Had you used the I Ching previously in terms of helping you work on your art? The I Ching.

WAGNER: Have I ever used I Ching?

SMITH: No. Did you use I Ching in terms of your artwork?

WAGNER: No. I can't say that I ever did. No, I never used the tai chi or the hexograms in any way in my art. I used it to figure out where I was by tossing the coins, but I never actually used it, no.

SMITH: So you had your show at the American embassy?

WAGNER: Yes. That was interesting. I guess it was March. I finally went back to Bernard Lang and I said, "Bernard, what am I going to do? I have to go back to America. Is there anything that you have--you got any ideas what I'm going to do here?"

Well, he says, "As a matter of fact, I do. Last week, I called up the--" someplace in Berlin, it's called the house something. They show art. "And I'm going to give you an exhibition with two other people together. I'm going to give you an exhibition with Robert Bassler. Do you know him?"

WAGNER: I said, "Yes, he's a Californian."

And also a French artist who lives in America, in New York. And he said, "I'm sure I can get him all right. I'll have it together."

And I said, "Well, when?"

And he said, "Well, how about in May of this year?" March, April, May. No, June, that's what it was, June.

And I said, "Well, that sounds pretty good. We should be able to do that. I have to go home, I have to go back to America for a little while, get some things straightened out. We should be able to come back."

And he said to me, "How are we going to get the works from--where will they be?"

I said, "Well, I don't even know when my show is going

to be in Sweden. They told me it was going to be this spring."

"Oh well, that's no problem. Give me their telephone number. He called up the museum. That exhibition was going to end at the end of May. So he says, "Would you switch me over to the operator, please? Would you call the embassy, please." They called up the American embassy in Sweden.

He said, "Yes, hold the line." [another phone conversation] "Yes, how you doing, Kit? How is everything in Paris? I've got an artist that I'd like to have you meet sometime. He's a good artist, and maybe you could give him an exhibition over there. I can't talk to you right this moment, I'm in a conversation with Stockholm."

So he's back to Stockholm again: "Would we be able to pick up the works at the Södertalje museum on the date that I will send you and ship them immediately to the American embassy so they will arrive by, let's make it by June 20? Okay, that's it."

"Yes, Paris."

Another man comes in. "Bernard, it's important. How many tickets do you want for the Clutie show?" [laughter]

He says, "When is it? Make it four." It was a puppet show for children, for his family.

It's all going on like that, he's talking, you know.

"Okay, Paris, put John Plompens on in Brussels. John, I'm sending you a man over here in about six months, Gordon Wagner. I want you to meet him. Send me on up to Amsterdam. I want to arrange for him to have an exhibition in Amsterdam."

He's doing all this over a desk. Then he said, "One more call I'll make." He calls up the Prudhoe Gallery, and he said, "Mr. Prudhoe, Bernard Lang of the embassy. I'm giving Gordon an exhibition in June, and I think it would be quite nice if we had half of the works here and the other half in your gallery, don't you? After all, you're only two blocks away, and we can both have annexes."

Prudhoe says, "Of course, we'll do it."

When he did it, he did it. He didn't ask, he just did it. It was just like that, the whole thing just solved itself. He shipped all the works and did the whole thing. We came back about a week before the opening, back to London, and helped them set up the exhibition. I wanted to be there for the installation. Bernard is such a funny man, and he's a real pleasure to work with. I've never met a man like him in my life. Sense of humor and joy and knowing what he's doing. A real wonderful person.

Then we went back to Los Angeles. I didn't bring anything with me, I was just going to show what I had in Sweden first and see how that came out. So then we went

back again to London. While I was over here for that month and a half, two months, Kenneth Stone of Stone Publications was working with my **Memories of the Future**, finishing up that edition that he'd started, so it was possible for me to have some of those to return to London with. So I shipped off--

SMITH: The lithograph series.

WAGNER: Yeah. I shipped off about, oh, ten sets of those.

SMITH: When had you done the drawings for **Memories of the Future**?

WAGNER: In New Mexico, in Taos.

SMITH: When?

WAGNER: About 1968 or '69. In the summer when we would stay in New Mexico for three months, when we lived there, when we had our home there. I worked there on all of the drawings.

SMITH: And the poems were written--

WAGNER: Different times; over a period of time. From Mexico. They were all compiled very late.

SMITH: I wanted to ask you, in terms of-- You mentioned the feelings you felt in England in terms of the layers of society, riding the tube and being with different types of people; the absurdity that you were aiming at-- How is that reflected in the work--or is it reflected in the work you are doing now? Is **Firaskew**, for example, or **The [Interior]**

Castle of Saint Teresa [also known as **The Castle of the Seven Dwelling Places**], do they reflect that kind of feeling that you had then?

WAGNER: **Firaskew** does, very much. Because I find that real cities, like New York and London and Paris, the people are so close together and so with each other that there is no time for loneliness in that way. Because they don't have to be lonely, they can get out there and be right with the people. And they can feel. They always make some kind of a contact with a person. If you just walk out on the street in England, you'll make contact with somebody. The quickest way that I know to make contact with the British is to ask directions to somewhere. They'll go on and on, give you a history of that whole two or three blocks where you're going to walk and what happened there four, five hundred years ago. So you never have to worry about that.

WAGNER: People who think that the New Yorkers and the British and people like that are snobbish and not friendly are absolutely wrong. If you walk in London, the people aren't going to say, "Hi, hi, hi, how are you?" They don't even make eye contact with another person, they're so used to being within the movement of the people. There is no contact that way, but on a personal basis, when you meet them in some situation where you like them, you know immediately, and they like you, and you have a long-standing friend, it's not just a flash. They go in depth, because they have that ability of mastering the English language.

Even to the man on the street. I asked one day where this building was with a stained-glass window. He was a poor-looking old man; you'd take him here as a street person. And I said, "I know there's a building down here someplace, and it has this beautiful dome." And he says, [with Cockney accent] "Yeah, right down here about a block. Let's go, I'll show you." He takes me there. He said, "When I listen to you, I can tell by the cut a your tongue you ayn't one of our countrymen. Where you comin' from?" He says, "You comin' from Canada? Or maybe one of the colonies, or New Zealand, Austraylia? I know where

you're comin' from. You're comin' from Olland."

I said, "No, I'm coming from America."

"You're not comin' from America, I know that. You're not talkin' like an American," [laughter] he tells me.

But this was just getting a direction. Now, you could go on with that man for ten years, because he was ready to be your friend. And it's this way.

SMITH: Firaskew, you did a drawing of Firaskew in that period. Is that the beginning of the sculpted piece, of the assemblage?

WAGNER: Well, it was the first idea that I had about making something that would relate to something. I had no conception of what it really was. I had notes and segments and fragments of Firaskew in sketches and sketchbooks, notes and dreams written about it. But nothing solid.

SMITH: At that time what did Firaskew mean to you? What was it?

WAGNER: It's only a name that comes from a dream that was marked on a beer can or the side of a wall when I'm going in my dreams. I'd run into this sign, "Firaskew," with an arrow pointing. It's either through a cleavage in the rocks or it's marked on the highway or on a dirt road. I always find myself in this environment where the cities, buildings, are usually out of proportion. Some of them are very complicated, tied together with spiderwebs, total

mirrors. Sometimes they have churches with a streetcar running down the pews or down the center aisle. The streetcar has been, has come up a mountain where you can never see the city, you only can see under it at all times till it reaches the top, ascending upward. It has so many different meanings, so many different places I've been on my nocturnal voyages, that it's hard to-- I could build twenty of these from the different concepts. I just took one out of one dream. The way it sort of juxtaposed itself, that's this one.

SMITH: Are you going to build any more of those?

WAGNER: I'm thinking about building several, probably, in my lifetime.

SMITH: In terms of the drawings, the **Firaskew** drawings that relate to the London period, how would you compare that with, say, the work of [Maurits] Escher?

WAGNER: Well, I don't think it would be compared to Escher. Escher was a man who was working more in architectural illusions, in negative and positive space to create trompe l'oeil. My drawings had something else in their mind than that. They weren't mechanical problems, mathematical problems, they were actually feelings of nonsense. They were sort of rebuses, that's what they were. There was no place for mechanical, mathematical, constructed drawings and paintings with that kind of

precision.

SMITH: You mentioned once that your work after this period, you were exploring the absurd, but it wasn't a critique. Could you explain that a little bit more? You were showing that society was absurd, but you weren't criticizing it.

WAGNER: Absolutely.

SMITH: That sounds like a contradiction, so could you explain that?

WAGNER: No, I believe that the absurd is very important. And I think that not-- There are too many critics, and there are not enough people who explore the absurd and laugh and enjoy it. The critic just criticizes it without enjoying it. And after all, I believe the irrational absurdity and nonsense is one of our most important elements in order to exist in this society. It's sort of a counterforce against the negation of a lot of people who are putting things down and showing the ugliness and the-- I want to show funny things, joy. Not from a critical aspect at all; I'm not even looking at it from that. Just being part of it. I would be one of the elements within the piece.

SMITH: Shifting a little bit, how would you compare the stuff that you found in English dumps with the things that you found in California dumps?

WAGNER: Wetter, greener, mossier, slimier, and hardly any rust. Hardly any rust.

SMITH: Why was that?

WAGNER: I don't know why things get that way, but they get kind of mossy and green. A lot of lichen gets on the junk, because it's so damp. Damp, really damp. Everything I found I had to take it home and dry it out for about a week before I could use it, because it was just permeated.

SMITH: Then didn't you lose the greeness of the damp, of the lichen?

WAGNER: Yeah, but then you have this wonderful blackness that comes out. Yeah. Even the wood gets that way.

SMITH: Were the objects different, what was thrown away different?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. Quite a few things that I found, Victorian pieces and junk like that. Some glasses and figures, small figures. I got one wonderful-- Two of them I actually found, figures, one was of René Magritte, about this high.

SMITH: A figure of Magritte?

WAGNER: Yeah, a figure.

SMITH: Of him or by him?

WAGNER: Of him. I found that one. I still have that piece right here in the house. Another one was a burgher woman. I put her into a box called the Theatre of the

Upside Down, where I had her on a stage in confusion standing on an egg in the clouds. She's looking back through endless doors, and up on the top there's the city of Antwerp, and there's the Schelde with the barges. But it's all upside down. You have to turn the box over to see that it's Antwerp and the Schelde and the water. I found those both there.

SMITH: I'd like to get into the topic of your constructed boxes. You started making them in England?

WAGNER: I started building these things-- What actually happened was that I really took a new look, also, from the surrealist aspect. I met a surrealist there who is probably the best living surrealist in England at the present time by the name of Conroy Maddox. He wrote a book recently on [Salvador] Dalí. Getting to these people and to-- What was his name? Stephan de Villiers--

SMITH: Marcel Jean? Are you talking about Marcel Jean?

WAGNER: No, Stephan de Villiers, he was a surrealist. Max White Joyce, who was the critic on the [**International Herald-Tribune**] who really encouraged surrealism in England, and Jean-Pierre Lehman and his friend by the name of Jacques something, from Belgium. About, oh, fifteen to twenty other artists that I met, we were all stimulated by going back and really getting back into what surrealism is all about. We really studied it, so it became sort of

our--almost a renaissance to us, rebirth within us. Poetry, and all of them. So we really went into it extensively. John Lyle Press, in Devon, who had all of the original manifestoes and books, wonderful surrealist books, one-of-a-kind editions. All of these things became part of my head, and I realized that I would like to get a little purer and not use the objects and the junk. Really get into a pure form. But at that time, I was about to teach at the Camden Art Center, and I met many, many fine people and fine artists there. There was this whole movement, I think. It was regenerating itself again, you know, to go back through this, getting back into surrealism.

SMITH: In terms of your constructed boxes, looking at the development over the last fifteen years, it strikes me that the boxes started out much larger than you're now making them. Is that a correct perception? Were your boxes in the seventies larger than your boxes in the eighties, by and large?

WAGNER: No, it all depended on what I wanted to develop from that. No, I don't think the scale or dimension means much. It wasn't a controlling factor of anything. It just happened that way.

SMITH: Yeah. The other thing that seems to be happening is the figures, the scale within the box gets smaller. Like the box [Black Sun] that you have in the other room

with the woman in the mirror--I forget the name of that box--the figure is a foot high. In Firaskew and many of these other things, you are now using figures that are less than an inch.

WAGNER: Yeah, I've done that on purpose. I'm trying to take a small environment, without filling it up, and make it seem very large with only very small things so it seems--it seems monumental in a very small area by doing the scale, by reducing the scale of the objects related to the landscape.

SMITH: Now, you call these constructed boxes, but many of the elements in the box are, look like, toy figures. Are those figures that you find in the street, or do you go and buy them, or how are they-- Were some of them made?

WAGNER: Well, the ones that are actually made figures are by manufacturers. I found them in different places. Sometimes I'll find them on the street, sometimes I'll find them in a junk store, sometimes in a cake decorating company. If I just happen to be walking someplace; I'm never looking for them. But I say, "Gee, those are nice. I'll pick those up, maybe I could use them someday." You know, I don't buy them with any specific purpose in life at all. I'm always looking for realistic figures. Not cute figures, not rabbits and cute, little things, not angels and things of that nature; realistic figures that are

actually to scale of what they are. Like you won't find any cute objects on any piece I've ever made, because I can't stand cute art. I found these four girls the other day on the street. Who knows what will ever happen to them, but they were waiting for me to pick them up. They were from somebody's party, I suppose.

SMITH: They were just on the sidewalk, in the gutter?

WAGNER: In the alley.

SMITH: In the alley.

WAGNER: Yeah, right near the art store down there, near the Espresso Bar. A man who has been very nice and gives me objects and things and I trade with him--we don't trade, I give him things that I think he likes and he'll hand me something that he thinks I'll like--is Bruce Houston. Bruce is always, "Hey, I'd like to give you this. Look here! Introduce yourself," you know. "She'll talk to you. Yes, introduce yourself." Bruce, he's a child at heart, like it should be. He talks to all his people and objects. So, really, the transition between the large-- I find that if you build the environment and then put the people in on the right scale, it really makes it more powerful than if the person is dominating the whole environment. It's like a giant within a house, you know? Gnomes are much more beautiful in houses, little people, you know, than a giant; it takes up too much space.

SMITH: Still, the titles seem to be an important part of the overall piece. I'm wondering if the title and the conception come to you at the same time?

WAGNER: Sometimes. Sometimes I build the piece around the title--it's really the conception, you know. Sometimes not. Sometimes I have to think of a title. The last piece I built--out there--it had to do with the ship up on the mountain and the town below, you know, to give it that dimension of the desert mountain and the riverboat up in the bushes, and down below the white city. Well, there was only-- I couldn't think of a title for that, but then it came out of my dream. Just like that, it hit it. It's called **Town Ship**.

SMITH: Well, that brings up the whole topic of pun boxes.

WAGNER: Exactly.

SMITH: You have done some pun boxes that go back to the sixties. It seemed to me they were--

WAGNER: No, these are all done in the eighties, these pun boxes.

SMITH: But weren't there a couple-- Well, **Circus in a Keyhole**, that's not really a pun box. No, okay, I'll take that back.

WAGNER: Oh, I've used puns from time to time in pieces, but the whole Pun Series was done in the eighties.

SMITH: Okay, well, let's talk about the Pun Series.

WAGNER: Oh, that's getting a little far ahead, I think. I've got to go through-- First, I'd like to go back through the boxes that I developed.

After my show in England, during that time, Jean-Pierre Lehman and his friend, Jacques, said, "You've got to go to Belgium, my friend, you are missing the boat. England is not the place for you, it's Belgium."

And I said, "Why Belgium?"

"Well," they said, "you've got to go there for several reasons: The people in Belgium will really love what you are doing. And not only will they love what you are doing, but you told us one time that you had an uncle named Jean-François Millet, a great uncle, and you know, he was Flemish, and you should go and find out about all these things."

So we did just that. Virginia and I went to Bruges from London, took the train, while we were having my exhibition. From Bruges we went on to Gent and stopped in Gent. I was told by Jan Thunholm in Sweden to check out about three or four galleries in Gent, because--and also Arthur Secunda said it was a good place. So I went to Arthur's first gallery. I'd already sent that man pictures years ago, and I'd forgotten about it. So I went to see him. "Oh yeah, I know you. I've got your pictures in my desk. When do you want to have an exhibition?"

I said, "Well, I have things in England now, in London."

"Well, I couldn't give the exhibition before five years, I'm tied up. Go see my friend [Raoul van der Veecken] down around the corner, [Galerij] Kaleidoscoop, he'll probably help you."

I went there; he looked at them, he says, "When do you want the show?" And I went to two other galleries in Gent; they said, "Yeah, when would you like to have a show?" So I finally had to make a choice between the three.

I went to Brussels and found three galleries there, the same thing. The three I went to all wanted to give me a show. And I said, "Well, I have a show in London. I want to have a show here in Gent and then Brussels, then I'd like to work it out so I have one in Amsterdam."

So they said, "You come back."

In the meantime, a lady in Brussels, Madame Beele of [Galérie] l'Angle-Aigu, she said, "Bring some works back with you very soon, I'd like to show them in my gallery and keep them here. I have people coming all the time." About that time Joan Shors, who's a critic for the American newspaper in Brussels, walked in and said, "They'll love your work. They only think of one thing in Belgium: surrealism. Everybody's going to love your work." That encouraged me.

I went back to England, I told Bernard Lang what I had arranged, and he said, "Don't forget to see my friend John Plompens, he'll help you. Anything you want done. He's at the American embassy in Brussels. He'll take care of everything for you." So that was going to happen in, let's see, February, March.

SMITH: What year are we talking about?

WAGNER: 'Seventy-four. That's when it was going to happen. From London we went back home, and we stayed there until February. So I had a show lined up at Kaleidoscoop for February, March; March it was. March 4, I think, yeah. Then it went to Brussels in April, and it went to Amsterdam in June. So I had real-- I had it all scheduled. In Amsterdam, I had it in the American library [Nederland Amerika Instituut], the first show. Then from there I was asked to have another show in Amsterdam in the Israel Galerij, where they called me the American Jew.

SMITH: Why?

WAGNER: They thought I was, that's all. The critic, naturally, being the Israel Galerij, [thought] I must be an American Jew.

SMITH: I see, Wagner.

WAGNER: The name Wagner could be. The Dagblatt.

SMITH: Did you sell well in Europe?

WAGNER: Yeah, very.

SMITH: Better than in the United States?

WAGNER: Well, when you take it as an exhibition, yes; from an exhibition standpoint, yes. A one-man show, yeah.

SMITH: What about the criticism?

WAGNER: Excellent criticism, wonderful critics. The French critics and the Flemish critics, they have a wonderful quality about the way they write; they're not destructive or self-oriented. They get into-- They really are observers rather than-- They really live within your art.

SMITH: When did you begin to introduce trompe l'oeil into your work?

WAGNER: About '74, right after I came back from Belgium.

SMITH: What kind of things were you doing, what kind of tricks were you trying to play?

WAGNER: A lot of boxes with mirrors and trick angles. I used a lot of rational symbols like checkerboards and architecture of-- A feeling like it was a game. And not putting anything on these rational formats that had anything to do with anything but nonsense, the irrational.

SMITH: How does **The Phantom** fit into this period?

WAGNER: Now, **The Phantom** you're talking about is the shadow coming out on the floor without anybody in the door. It fits into the period very well, because it was done about that time, '74, '75.

SMITH: 'Seventy-five.

WAGNER: It was the beginning of using these phantom objects in the glass, like illusions of glass and putting the ghost forms behind them. At that time I was doing that with mirrors. I was also creating physical impossibilities like **The Bowler** bowling through the wall. There's a brick wall dividing the box with the bowler. He's bowling, but his shadow goes under the wall, but he can't get through himself. On the floor, the shadow goes through. And then the one of the shadow that fell down. The floor tipped up, and it had boards on one side and the dark figure of the man is on the other. But the shadow fell down on the stairs and is in three dimensions going up and fragmented as a person, the shadow. It's called **The Shadow of a Doubt**. These are all in collections of shadow pieces.

SMITH: What about **Separate Reflections**?

WAGNER: That one is-- It's in a building where a businessman is all dressed up in his necktie and his suit, off for work, but on the other side in the room there's a mirror, and he was such a disgusting person that his reflection stayed home in the mirror.

SMITH: In terms of the mirror tricks, did that involve a lot of experimentation in order to get-- Let me rephrase that question. Did the concept for the effect come first, or did you have to play with your materials and see things

juxtaposed?

WAGNER: Well, not really, because I can draw these things out pretty well, the angles where mirrors are, and the like. I build all my boxes-- I draw them all first to scale; everything, every detail is to scale, like in building a house. So I know the angles and can develop all that on a piece of paper so that when it goes together, there it is; I don't make mistakes and spend a lot of money and a lot of time going back and trying to figure out what happened. Because it's usually all drawn out before I ever touch a piece of wood or a mirror or anything else; I know exactly how it's going to fit.

SMITH: What does mirror imagery signify to you? Why was it so particularly appealing to you?

WAGNER: Well, it's always been fascinating. Mirrors have always been fascinating to everybody, I think, because people spend a lot of time in front of mirrors. Actually, the only real thing is the mirror; everything it reflects is unreal. Mirrors, to me-- Magicians use mirrors; mirrors were signs of elegance in castles and coffeehouses and buildings; mirrors change dimensions of things; mirrors create illusions of things that don't exist; they create illusions of things that do exist but are not there. They do all sorts of things that fascinate me. The more I can adapt the mirror to doing something-- There's just not that

many ways you can-- After a while you run out of things to do with mirrors. You can send things to infinity; you can move rooms; you can transfer people from one place to another; you can go through mazes and labyrinths. But actually, after a while you can't keep doing the same thing over and over again, you know.

SMITH: But you use--almost all of those techniques are in **Firaskew.**

WAGNER: Well, this was kind of a compilation of using all the things that I had previously done with images. In some way or other, I could adapt them into this, into **Firaskew.**

SMITH: So how long did you work with mirrors as a major theme in your work?

WAGNER: Actually, I used mirrors a little, not in the sense of the mirror as I used it in--I would have a mirror in a piece, you know, but to perform magic tricks in front of your eyes, about '74, '75 I started using mirrors, I'd say.

At the same time, I started fabricating my materials rather than-- Because being in Belgium-- You can't find anything in Belgium. There's nothing to find. It's such a clean country, it's just spotless. They don't throw things away in Belgium; there's no trash. So you are forced to make things, and so that's where I started, actually, in '73, when I worked there. And I was making new pieces. I

had to make new pieces; I had to show-- The exact amount of pieces that came into the country had to leave the country. After all, I sold over half of the works in Belgium. I had to replace those to get my works out of Belgium or I'd have to pay a super heavy duty. They let me come in with my works for three months to have my shows, and then out the other side. But nothing was to be sold. I had to get it all--I had to replace everything.

But they'd never seen any of the things, they just knew it was art in boxes. So when I went to the border, I had the same: just art in boxes. The guy said, "Well, let me see what you do." So I had to undo the whole crate, and he counted them. I had matchboxes, and I had tiny little boxes like this; anything to say it's a box. "And what do you value these pieces?" I said, "Five dollars apiece, that's what I came in with."

I sold about twenty in Gent and five in Brussels, out of about thirty-five. So I was busy making things the whole time I was living in Gent, which was probably about, at that time, three months that I could stay there. I had to start right away. I had a $17-a-month studio up on the roof and a place to work. I was working night and day to get these-- Virginia was here and I was there. She didn't come over until Easter, so I had lots of time to work.

SMITH: One of the things I wanted to ask you about your

stay in Sweden, England and Belgium, perhaps Belgium and England in particular, was, were you attracted to the symbols of medieval Christianity? Did that begin to interest you at that time?

WAGNER: Belgium, no; Sweden, no; England, yes. Some of the artifacts, like censers of that time, that were in the British Museum, some of that medieval art of that time was incredible. Patinas and censers for the incense burners for the castles, and the playing cards, you know. They had playing cards cut out for the smoke to come through, for the censers, you know?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: All of that sort of thing fascinated me. I did drawings of them, as a matter of fact. I've got them in my Under the Crown series, a couple of them, where the king is balanced on his censer puffing the smoke from underneath, from a chimney pot. He's just floating up there, he could collapse at any moment.

SMITH: So in terms of your religious development, your stay in Europe did not draw--it was not an aspect of drawing you back to Catholicism, or drawing you into Catholicism?

WAGNER: I was never drawn back to Catholicism because I wasn't a Catholic in the first place. I never was, so I couldn't be drawn back. But I appreciated going to the

Catholic church, because everybody goes to Catholic church in Europe, because that's where all the art is. Incredible art in the churches. Like in Gent: one of the greatest paintings in the world is in the Saint Bavo's Cathedral, the [**Adoration**] of the **Mystic Lamb** [by Hubert and Jan van Eyck]. So many great paintings. Antwerp has some great paintings in there. They've got one of Michelangelo and one of da Vinci and all the Rubens; some of his most important paintings are in the cathedral at Antwerp. So there's a feeling that gets you off the street to go into the cathedrals. You feel like you're protected there. I was fascinated by some of the things. I used to go into the church at mass and sit in the back row. Just sit there, meditate. Like a yogi or something. But I felt a lot, and I cried; I used to cry in churches in Europe. It was like a purging of my inner self from the feelings of the music, the great music of Bach and-- They had the greatest concerts of all of them in the Saint Bavo's Cathedral. That's where Bach did his first **Saint Matthew's Passion.** The first place he ever did it was in Gent, in Saint Bavo's Cathedral, the preview; he conducted. That kind of feeling, it's-- Naturally, there's a certain feeling of the spiritual. It's all so cleansing. But as far as being brought back to the church, that had nothing to do with it whatsoever because I never was in the church

in the beginning. My wife, my first wife, was a Catholic, and my children went to church and were baptized, but I wasn't. I thought I was part of it. I thought they'd given me some papers that would make me that way, but I never followed it.

SMITH: I'd like to talk a little bit about **Russian Hill Incident.**

WAGNER: That's an interesting piece that relates sort of to the same as **The Phantom** and **Georgette** and **Separate [Reflections]**, taking people and putting them into sort of impossible positions. I was always fascinated by a window next to my house there, the kitchen window. In San Francisco, you look out of your kitchen window and often you'll see somebody else's staircase running down the side of it. This particular one, the staircase was running down and around until you saw the underside of the stairs. And I used to visualize somebody actually walking horizontally up the underside of those stairs. It was a nice impossible situation. What I was trying to get was "impossibility" in my art. Impossibility, as Laszlo Logosi, I believe, quoted one time, "Impossibility is the operative mode of art," when he did the film **Szirkus**, the Ferenc Karinthy story.

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FEBRUARY 28, 1987

SMITH: We left off last time with your coming to Belgium. You had a show in Gent, three shows going at more or less the same time in Gent, Brussels and Amsterdam. How long did you stay in Belgium?

WAGNER: That time I stayed about-- Well, first I was in Belgium for about two months, and then I went off for a little trip to Madrid. Then I came back to Belgium; I had my studio there. Then I went up to Amsterdam, up to that, and stayed in Amsterdam for two months. Then I came back to Belgium again, and I was there for another three months. Put it all together, and it makes about seven months, I guess, right?

SMITH: Did you go back to Belgium later?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: Have you continued to-- Through the seventies?

WAGNER: In '79 I went back again. When I left Belgium I came back home to Silver Lake.

SMITH: Where were you showing in Belgium? Who were your representatives?

WAGNER: My first gallery show was in Gent, and my gallery dealer was Raoul van der Veecken. He had the Galerij Kaleidoscoop. Wonderful art dealer, wonderful man. A real joy to be with him and his family. I don't think I've ever

laughed so much in my whole life as I did with that man. He had a tremendous wit and sense of humor. We both were in complete rapport with one another. It was interesting, because at the exhibition he told me that everybody liked my work. Gallery openings in Belgium are usually on Sunday morning from ten to one, and everyone comes, all the families, children by the tons, everybody comes. They go to all of the galleries within the city on that morning, all the openings. They call them **vernissages**, or **tentoonstellingen** in Dutch, which means opening. You meet some of the most amazing people at these openings. You try to communicate with them in some way by learning their language a little bit, trying. They can speak enough English, so between the two of us, we get along just fine.

At the end of the show, at the end of the opening, I said, "Well, how did it do, Raoul?"

He said, "Well," he says, "that piece over there is the only one I see that we're not going to sell."

SMITH: Which piece was that?

WAGNER: "Because I'm buying that for myself," he says. [laughter]

SMITH: Oh, I see. These are all constructed boxes?

WAGNER: They were all boxes.

SMITH: Not funk boxes, but constructed boxes.

WAGNER: No, they were funk boxes. They were within the

old context of found objects from England and some from Sweden, and different things. Plus the ones that I had in Sweden. I had a pretty good collection then, close to fifty pieces, you know, that I could-- We actually showed about thirty, so I still had some left over for Brussels. But it was an amazing exhibition and an amazing turnout. It's a university city, Gent, a very old university. Professors were there, the heads of the music department, all sorts of interesting people live in Gent. It has a population of 500,000 people. It's a very old city. In fact, it was the second largest city in northern Europe next to Paris.

SMITH: At one time.

WAGNER: At one time, yeah. So the whole place, it feels right to me. I still love to go there, and I just kiss the street like I was back home.

SMITH: But you had mentioned once--this was a long time ago when we first met--going to Belgium was in some ways like returning home, home to the world of the piers. Could you explain that a little bit more?

WAGNER: Yeah. When I went there the first time from London, when I arrived in Oostende on the boat, it was all of a sudden some feeling that I was home, that I'd been there before in some other time or period in my life. I was really home, and I knew it; I could feel it. There was

no way to explain it, but-- There was a warmth. And the architecture, the beauty-- Most people don't even like Belgium. They never advertise it in the tourist guides. Nobody goes to Belgium. It's wonderful, because the Belgians discourage advertising Belgium; they want to keep it the way it is. Belgium is so full of great art; some of the greatest, the Flemish. The cities are so--they're not spoiled, no high rise, no junk, no Bauhaus-type of high rises in the city.

SMITH: Some in Brussels, but--

WAGNER: No, I'm talking about Gent.

SMITH: Oh, Gent, yeah.

WAGNER: They've kept it the way it is, the old buildings, the old way. Bruges is the same way; you wouldn't see anything like that in Bruges. The countryside going there was like when my great-uncle, Jean-François Millet, painted the landscapes and the feeling of the peasants, of the gleaners in the **Angelus**. Probably the reason I like Belgium-- I can't understand it. My mother was from Paris, and my father was from Amsterdam, so maybe I'm supposed to be in between in Belgium. [laughter]

SMITH: Well, that's a possibility, yeah.

WAGNER: The more I was in Belgium, the more I realized that people there are like people from fantasy, fairyland people. Their whole makeup is surreal, the way they are,

the way they think. That's why I think that surrealism was very strong in Belgium. More painters came from Belgium that were surrealist than probably any other country, because they were actually influenced by the Salon 20, which was the group of the Dreamers of Decadence, you know, Jan Toorop and G. [Georges-Antoine] Rochegrosse and Fernand Khnopff. They were all Belgians, all those symbolists before surrealism, and they belonged to the Rosicrucian, rose cross. So with that energy within the country-- You can't explain what it is, but it's in the air. It's the light of Bosch, it's the light of Brueghel in the atmosphere, the clear, steel-blue light. There's no light like it anyplace; it's a painter's light. All of those elements make up some sort of an alchemical solution that made me realize, well, I was home again.

SMITH: I wanted today to talk about surrealism and your relationship to surrealism. In our last session, you mentioned that you had embarked, at this period of your life, on an intensive study of surrealism. How did that develop?

WAGNER: Well, it really, actually, started in Belgium, where I really wanted to go into it. I started reading all of the manifestoes everything on [André] Breton, everything on [Paul] Eluard, everything on [Robert] Desnos; and realizing [René] Magritte was a Belgian, Paul Delvaux was a

Belgian, León Spillieart and a lot of younger ones. Surrealism was strong, and when I would talk to these young men from the academy, I found that that would just about be the only art interest they had.

SMITH: Which academy are you talking about?

WAGNER: In Gent, the painting academy of Gent, which is an excellent academy. In Antwerp I had the same reaction to the gallery that handled my work in Antwerp, the Galerij Te Zwarte [Panter]. Adrian van Raemdonck was the owner, and he was only interested in showing surrealism. Belgian surrealism was stronger at that time than at any other time in the history of art. Well, I was very influenced by it, and I started to think that-- I had realized these people existed, but being from the funk school, and whatnot, we were still doing dada surrealism and California funk. We were influenced by it indirectly.

SMITH: Did you know you were doing it when you did it?

WAGNER: I wasn't that much interested in what school it was; it was just the California funk school. When I started looking at the objects of Breton and [Joan] Miró and a lot of the assemblages of these early surrealists, I realized they pretty much had been into that. Also, I realized that the daddy of them all was probably Marcel Duchamp, who was into the object.

SMITH: Did you realize this, say, in connection with the

Duchamp show at the Pasadena Art Museum?

WAGNER: I knew there was a parallel, definitely. The same with Joseph Cornell at the Pasadena Art Museum and René Magritte at the Pasadena Art Museum. I knew there was a parallel, and I knew that we were in simpatico. If I would have met them, we would have been able to be good friends, because we were all in the airwaves, you know.

SMITH: Were you studying surrealism by yourself or was it with other artists, other poets?

WAGNER: By reading and by being with artists who had that sort of tendency. I think it just evolved automatically.

SMITH: Were there California artists who shared this interest with you? Any names in particular?

WAGNER: Well, at that particular time there were quite a few artists that were doing parallel things, like [Edward] Kienholz and Artie Richer and Tony Berlant, Charles Frazier.

SMITH: We're talking sixties now, fifties, sixties. But you were not studying surrealism at this time yet?

WAGNER: No, I was making art, not worried at all about any of it.

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Just making art.

SMITH: But you began to study surrealism in the mid-seventies when you went to Belgium?

WAGNER: When I felt there was a movement. I realized at that moment that surrealism to me was beyond dada and funk. So that's when my change actually came, was in Belgium. It evolved into the more narrative, like with the figure and telling something of the humor, the wit; not just found objects, but starting to fabricate the objects. It was at that time I knew I had to go beyond funk, I had to step over the boundries. By reading all of these people here, from Max Ernst to Breton to Delvaux to Duchamp, I collected every bit of fragment. I still do; anything that has to do with surrealism is either filed in my cigar boxes of small drawings or small postcards into my bookcases, all surrealism. I'm still a surrealist fanatic, because there's never going to be a death of surrealism because it was never born.

SMITH: Well, at the time you were studying surrealism in the seventies, were there other artists with whom you were discussing it?

WAGNER: Oh sure. In Belgium there were many. Like Lucien Cornelis was one of my best friends in Belgium. Then there was Arnold Verhé and there was Camille Davé, who was one of the best surrealists in Belgium. He died recently. And Pierre Roobjee, who was a poet. All of these men were very much in simpatico with me. They would come and invite me to their projects. Lionel Vinche. They all did surrealist

objects and combined painting and sculpture. They were all in the museums in Belgium. A wonderful group of people. We talked about it all the time in the coffeehouses. I would go into the coffeehouse, and they would say to me, "Goeden avond, Graf," which means good evening, Count. Because that was my name; they named me that, the Count of Rommelgem, the junk place, so the Graf van Rommelgem, who was actually a cartoon character in Belgium by a very wonderful artist who did this sort of thing. I even looked like him. The Count of the Junk Place, that was my name. I would come into the bar, and we would immediately get into surrealism. We would talk about [Stéphane] Mallarmé, about Benjamin Peret or Tristan Tzara. We'd have arguments about surrealism, about where it's going and what it means, and really get into it. And I say, I would ask, "Would you ever be anything but a surrealist?" They said, "What else is there?" Then they would always have something for me, these artists. There was an artists' bar; it was called the Gallows.

SMITH: This was in Gent?

WAGNER: Yeah. It was called the Gallows. It was at one time the gallows hanging place for the castle of Gent, right on the square, and it turned into a coffeehouse, an artists' bar. They would always have something for me. They'd reach in their pockets, "Hey, Graf," and they'd hand

me an object. They'd collect things for me. The children would--little kids, four and five years old, "Gordon, Gordon," and then they'd hand me something, a toy or something they didn't want anymore, they'd give it to me. I've never been treated anyplace in my life like I was treated in Belgium. Probably the fact I was from California, American, and they had expressed an interest in finding out about these things from me.

SMITH: Let me ask you-- We'll get back to the subject of surrealism in a little bit. In Sweden, England, Belgium, was there a high interest in what was happening in American art at the time?

WAGNER: I didn't feel there was much interest at all in Belgium. In London there was a bit, but not much, because the British still love Romney and Reynolds and Gainsborough, you know, for their Victorian houses. There's very little interest in contemporary art in England.

SMITH: What about Sweden?

WAGNER: Oh, they love contemporary art. The Swedes are good artists themselves. All these people have such-- They have great artists, you know. When you have somebody like Walter [Hopps], who controls the world of the arts, he sees to it that [Claes] Oldenburg and all of these people are in the right places in all the museums.

SMITH: So pop art was very popular?

WAGNER: Yes, pop art in England. It wasn't popular at all in Belgium. Even abstract expressionism-- They had a very difficult time accepting the abstract expressionists of American artists. Because they had their own artists; they felt that [Willem] de Kooning was Dutch, Cornelis [Van Beverloo, also known as Corneille] was Dutch, [Karel] Appel was Dutch. It was called the Cobra movement, and that was enough for them; they didn't need an extension from that.

SMITH: Was there an interest in color-field painting? In the manifestations of perceptual art?

WAGNER: Not too much, no. There were environments and installations by [Pol] Bury and [Vic] Gentille. They were sculptors, assemblage.

SMITH: Dutch or Belgian?

WAGNER: Belgian. All of them were-- Cornelis, of course, was Belgian. Appel lived right on the Flemish border. They had a feeling for [Maurits] Escher, who was from Antwerp. Basically, they-- There weren't very many American artists showing in Belgium at any time. I was one of the few, because I went there personally and represented myself. But most American artists wouldn't even think about going to Belgium; they'd go to Paris, or they'd go to London. The last place they would go would be Belgium. "What's there," you know? It's still that way. They say,

"What's in Belgium? Dull country, dull people," you know. It's not true. They're a very alive people, and very warm and friendly and giving. I don't think there was hardly a night in the whole time I was in Belgium that I didn't have a good meal in somebody's home, because when you had an exhibition, everybody wanted to invite you to their house for dinner. We had all this great, gourmet food that was presented to you. It was wonderful. And every Wednesday night I went to the prime minister's house.

SMITH: The prime minister now?

WAGNER: Well, he's not prime minister now, he was. De Scrijver, Auguste de Scrijver. He was the prime minister of Belgium. I used to go to his house every Wednesday night. His son, Leo, admired my work and myself. He was a real Proustian-type man.

SMITH: What do you mean by that?

WAGNER: Well, he lived in a Proustian world. He lived in this mansion; he lived way up in the corner all by himself. He had a couch where he could listen to Bach and Beethoven and Bartók; he loved Bartók. All these objects in the room, and cabinets full of things like crocodile nutcrackers and ship models and little objects. His bathroom door was completely, solidly located with every print that he could possibly get on there, small prints he had collected. Twenty of the prints were James Ensors. He

was a great fan of James Ensor, who was from Oostende. You see, another great artist from Belgium.

SMITH: Now, you mentioned that there was a strong interest in California when you were there. What was the image of California that these people had?

WAGNER: Well, actually I think the image-- I talked to some people who had been there, and they didn't consider anything in California really attractive, except San Francisco, and they felt that was the jewel of the United States. As for the rest of it: it was too spread out, there was no transportation; they couldn't get around, there were no rails like in Europe, where you can go from one town to another, anywhere. It was very difficult for them to get about, except a few. The other thing that a lot of them asked, "Is Los Angeles in Disneyland?" They thought that Disneyland was bigger than Los Angeles. [laughter] They'd never been here, but they wanted to know about these things. They'd heard of Disneyland, and they wanted to see that. That was the most important thing, because they heard there was a lot of magic in Disneyland. Like they knew all about the pirates, and they knew all about the haunted house and all the illusions, and they wanted to see that.

They didn't think too much of a lot of the young girls in California that came to visit in Belgium. They acted

very silly, they said; they didn't seem to be mature people, you know. The European girls in Belgium are very beautiful; some of the most beautiful women I've ever seen live in Belgium. Because they have this Flemish face which is almost something out of a [Hans] Memling of that time. Pure and real; there's no façades. So they asked about that, about "Are all women like the ones that come here or are there others?" Or, "Do they talk with a [speaks with heavy drawl] 'Well, I'll tell you now, it's like this,' like the Western accents, like movies? Are they like the movies?"

Most of them watch American films because they can learn English from that. That's the way they find it, in their TV, to watch English-speaking films. That's the way they learn their language, a lot of them, and go to school. They're forced to study four languages in school. They have to study Dutch, French, English, and any other language of their choice, from Spanish to Russian to Chinese to Greek or whatever. And that starts when they're five years old, they're already studying four languages. They're wonderful. And so warm. So me, being an American, which there are not very many American artists coming there, I was sort of--I don't know what; you might call me some sort of a freak, coming to their country to have an exhibition. But Arthur Secunda had an exhibition in

Belgium and did well. He loves Belgium. All of Arthur's friends and my friends, we're all together, we know each other. Beautiful people to deal with, because they want to help you all the time. They're so concerned about you, be sure that you're all right and find you your studio that you want to work in. It was really an experience.

SMITH: Since the mid-seventies, a number of critics who have written about your work have compared it to the Belgian artists Delvaux, Magritte. There was obviously a great change in what you were doing in terms of the boxes. Do you feel that your work is Magritte-like?

WAGNER: Well, I really admire Magritte. I think he was one of the great surrealists. I love his humor. The actual context of his work is basically his own house or windows that he looks through and objects juxtaposed within his house in a surreal manner to create a whole different ambiance. I don't think Magritte ever worked too much from dreams and therefore--

SMITH: Well, he said he wasn't interested in dreams.

WAGNER: I do, so I think I probably parallel Magritte sometimes architecturally, arches and interiors, but what I say, I think, is a whole different approach to it than Magritte.

SMITH: Well, in terms of the general subject of surrealism and your placement within surrealism as a continuing art

movement, generally, eroticism and sexuality are considered to be really prominent aspects of surrealist art. I'd like you to talk a little bit about the sexual, the erotic aspects of your art, how they manifest themselves.

WAGNER: Actually, in Belgium and Holland there's a whole movement of erotic and sexual art by academic painters that really make it look like it's really happening right in front of your eyes. They're really great painters. Especially in Holland more than Belgium. But I've seen paintings ten, fifteen feet long and three feet high, you just can't believe what you're looking at. Really eroticism, pure pornography.

SMITH: Well, I was thinking more about the Magritte painting where the dress is hanging on the hanger with the breasts coming out and the shoes with the toes coming out, or the [Alberto] Giacometti with the ball and bananalike object.

WAGNER: Well, at one time--

SMITH: The more ambiguous and evocative kind of eroticism.

WAGNER: At one time I did quite a few erotic pieces. That was back a ways, in the sixties. I mean deliberately erotic.

SMITH What pieces were they?

WAGNER: Oh, I went through a whole series of pieces related to eroticism that you-- I don't have them.

SMITH: Yeah, but could you describe them, give me some of the titles?

WAGNER: Oh, they were penises and breasts and lace.

SMITH: Evocative penises and breasts, or explicit?

WAGNER: Yeah, yeah. Lace and jewelry; very, very decadent.

SMITH: But were these explicit--

WAGNER: Boxes.

SMITH: --or were they evocative?

WAGNER: They were evocative. Sometimes they'd become a little more than evocative.

SMITH: What were some of the-- Can you remember some of the titles?

WAGNER: **Majestic Memories** was about a dancer, a woman who was wound up in webs and nets with all of these erotic things happening, and perfume bottles and beads and glass and phalluses. It was from a-- And a boa hat. It's in a collection at the moment; it belongs to Ronald Loeb. The reason I call it **Majestic Memories** was because most of these things came from this woman who was a dancer and entertainer in the Majestic Theatre in downtown Los Angeles.

SMITH: These are actual things that belonged to this woman?

WAGNER: Yeah, a lot of her goods, and a lot of things.

But I really twisted it around to make it quite sensual.

SMITH: How big was this box?

WAGNER: Oh, about [gestures] that large, eighteen inches by eighteen inches by four inches deep. It was a good piece. I had to repair it one time because his wife hit him over the head with it, [laughter] so we had to reconstruct it. His ex-wife, that is. But I did some with bottles, and things happening with them. I did things with different acts of sex going on.

SMITH: Explicit or evocative?

WAGNER: Expressing it, but it wasn't actually that, it was evocative. You knew it was there, but it wasn't.

SMITH: Dream images again?

WAGNER: No. This was at a time when I was not married to anyone. I think it was a lot of libido drive coming up that created it, because I was in a state of, sort of a demonic state of my love object [at the] time. I mention that in my book, **Memories of the Future**. I have a couple of drawings in there that are pretty erotic.

SMITH: Which ones would you say?

WAGNER: Well, one is the girl on the cross, and the other one is the one where she's sitting with your back to her in the vagina, you know? At that period it was love objects I was creating, because it was a sort of sublimation for being without sex.

SMITH: There is sort of an equation of vagina, rollercoaster, death in that series.

WAGNER: Exactly. That's what it was all about, basically. There were quite a few symbols like that throughout. And also, my boxes were of that same imagery at that time. William Wilson made a comment on it. What did he call them? Quite decadent, or something. I was having an exhibition of them at the Comara Gallery at that time, quite a few pieces.

SMITH: There was the other comment he made about you spend too much time on sex, love and death.

WAGNER: Well, he made that statement, yeah. What was it? No not-- Death, sex and religion; too much time on death, sex and religion. Well, these were so subconscious to me, these weren't dreams, because I hadn't started really working within the dream at that time. This was back before I really got into the dream, you know. They were only written dreams, but not manifesting dreams.

SMITH: Is there a relationship between this erotic art and the peyote altar art that you were doing at the same time?

WAGNER: No, that followed. But of course, that one is a rather sexual one in itself. That has sexual connotations: the man and the woman; the sun and the moon, moon being the woman and the sun--the mating of the two, where the sun fits into the crescent, or the man and the

woman. Yeah, that's in that symbolism.

SMITH: There's kind of a genital feeling of the--

WAGNER: Well, the legs coming down from that, you know.

SMITH: What about in your work since the seventies, is there a sexual or erotic element to it?

WAGNER: Well, I've avoided it completely now. I've turned it off, it doesn't exist within me. Any art relating to erotic art just doesn't exist. I've gone through it; it just doesn't happen anymore. Those things just happened. For some reason no more would I have that in any of my work that I know of. It just doesn't happen. Unless somebody wanted to read it into it, but certainly it's not intended to be in there by anything that I would have been responsible for.

SMITH: Was that a conscious decision on your part not to include it, or just--

WAGNER: No, I just outgrew it when I became married to Virginia [Copeland Wagner] in '67. My sublimation was over. I didn't have to sublimate anymore. The whole different thing changed. When I was in Belgium and Holland, and I looked at these paintings in these galleries, as a matter of fact, I was--

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SMITH: You were saying when you went to Belgium and Holland--

WAGNER: I looked at this dealer in London, the one I told you about. Jean-Pierre Lehman said I should go and see this gallery in Holland, in Amsterdam, because she would probably really love my work. I went to see her, and she said, "I'm not interested in your work at all." You know, Dutch are very gruff. "I'm not the slightest bit interested in your work. Where would Jean-Pierre Lehman get that idea from?" I looked in the gallery, and everything in the gallery was like a pornographic exhibition. I said, "When I look around, I realize that I wouldn't want to be in your gallery anyway because I'm not interested in this sort of art. I think it's decadent, and it's like a horror show. Thank you very much", and I left. And that sort of art, the more I looked at it the more I became really repelled by the stuff. It actually made me sick inside to see it. The cheapening of the beauty of love, taking away that wonderful magic of love for some cheap paintings and exploiting it like that was a little more than I could handle. So I think that was another reason that I subconsciously just moved away from even thinking about such things.

SMITH: Well, is there in your art--if it doesn't reflect, say, the sublimation of eros, is there then reflected in it anything of the state of marriage, the domesticity, the communion of a man and woman in marriage?

WAGNER: Not much. No.

SMITH: I'm not necessarily talking physical, carnal, but the overall--

WAGNER: Well, probably what happens is that it's a sort of escape from everything.

SMITH: Your art?

WAGNER: My art. Everything. Completely. Anything that can be tied down to a way, it's an escape from it. This is hard for some people to understand, because they're looking for a message, an erotic message, a protest message, or some kind of time-full message. In the dream state and through the context of my work, I want to make people happy, give them more humor and joy in life. People who are looking for the other have a difficult time finding that because actually they probably do not have appreciation or humor for my work. My work goes beyond face value; it goes inside, and it's up to them to find it.

SMITH: Well, another aspect of--an important part of surrealism is cruelty, sadism, a reflection of that. All of these are according to the classical surrealists, eroticism, sadism are what really inhabit the unconscious

and what need to be liberated. Is there cruelty in your art?

WAGNER: No. No more than Magritte shows cruelty; no more than Delvaux; no more than Max Ernst.

SMITH: Well, there is some in Max Ernst.

WAGNER: There was that part of surrealism, like Marat-Sade. [Antonin] Artaud and some of those people showed cruelty, but they were sort of the crazy people within the surrealist movement. Breton probably showed cruelty by the way he treated the artists within the movement by just throwing them out. But Breton really was a very sensitive man. I don't think he was actually cruel. I'm sure that people like--Yves Tanguy was not a cruel person. But surreal people like [Salvador] Dalí, he showed cruelty and he showed these things, but I always figured that he did it to shock people through his paranoia, and stinking feet and all the things he got into, you know. I think he did it for sensation; he's a showman, where Magritte was never a showman. There is always going to be-- The Marquis de Sade was part of the surrealist movement with some artists, but not all. There was a breaking up-- You might say it would be cruel to stage performances with animals and things-- Actually, the eyeball that they cut open in--

SMITH: In **Chien andalou.**

WAGNER: --was not a person's eye at all.

SMITH: That was a donkey eye.

WAGNER: Yeah, I know. I mean but not a live one.

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: It wasn't a person's eye. Things like that showed cruelty. The Spanish side of the surrealist movement, like--what's his name? Oscar Domínguez, who tried to destroy every church in Spain. He was out to get revolution, the communist time, the time of Trotsky. All this was going on. But Breton backed out of all that, he wasn't going to be any part of it. Eluard went on with it, and Gala Eluard, his wife, left him; she didn't want to be a Marxist, she went with Salvador Dalí. But Eluard was a great poet. Although with all this revolution that was going on-- Breton only had one idea, he wanted people to be free. His idea was to shake up the bourgeois in France, to make them learn something about creating from themselves. When he found out what these Marxists wanted to do, he pulled out because he didn't want that kind of control. He wanted people to be free, not controlled. He threw Salvador Dalí out of the surrealist movement because Salvador Dalí said that all blacks should be slaves forever. He threw Magritte out of the surrealist movement because Georgette, his wife, in a café in Paris was wearing a cross. He said, "Take off that cross." Magritte says, "Let's go," and he took off and went back to Brussels. He

offended a lot of people, and that might be classified as cruelty. In that aspect, he wanted to be the pope of surrealism. He wanted to run the show, right? But there were a lot of sweet people in the surrealist movement, they were not all cruel.

SMITH: But still, in many-- There is cruelty in Max Ernst, there's cruelty in Tanguy. Not across the board, not always, but there are pieces. It's an integral part of the surrealist ideology: Shocking the bourgeois respectability by showing the cruelty that is inherent in ourselves, in our psyche, and therefore in the society.

WAGNER: Yes, but if we go back four or five hundred years and you look at Bosch, you look at Brueghel, you look at the Flemish artists, you look at the Italians and some of the artists in the Sint Maarten Latem school and others in Belgium over periods of time, [Pieter] de Hooch, how much did they paint about cruelty, and they were not surrealists. Stretching people out with horses and dividing them, drawing and quartering people, saints and religious people. And how could anything be more cruel than the crucifixion of Christ? So painters of all-- Lots of painters show cruelty.

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: But they're telling it like it is.

SMITH: But in terms of your art, you are not interested in

cruelty?

WAGNER: I'm interested in being aware of the fact that cruelty exits all around me every day. We have more cruelty probably right now than we've had in years in our society, with all of the beaten children and the things that are going on right now, the way the poor are being neglected and the street people. The lack of interest and concern. There's more now probably than we've had in years in a different way, but it's still cruelty. I am aware of the fact that it's there, but if I were to paint it, then I'm being in a protest state, I'm not being in the world of timelessness. I'm telling you something that's either happened or is happening. Like Magritte, he can think of a thousand ideas, I remember him saying, but only one of them is a good one, because it follows what he's doing. Because he doesn't want to jump around and sidetrack himself off of where his direction is, so he has to give those others up. Max Ernst was the opposite, he'd do anything, you know. He'd have one painting this way, and a drawing this way, and a collage this way. But he still maintained his whole. Magritte just painted; he didn't want to get sidetracked by protest, hate. He made a few paintings, like **The Murder** and **The Room**, things like that, but basically he was a timeless artist.

SMITH: My understanding of surrealism is that an important

part of it is liberation through releasing the unconsciousness. By releasing the unconsciousness, you challenge bourgeois respectability, bourgeois sentimentality, bourgeois conventionality.

WAGNER: That is correct.

SMITH: Is that part of your art? Are you interested in challenging the bourgeois conventionality and respectability of here, in this country at this time, or of California?

WAGNER: No, not really.

SMITH: Of getting whoever to look at their lives in that way?

WAGNER: Not really. I was at one time.

SMITH: Which time?

WAGNER: When I was young, I used to worry about those things, but not anymore. I don't care what anybody thinks about them now. They can love them or they can hate them, it makes no difference to me. I have no-- I disconnect myself with it, detach myself from tomorrow and from yesterday, you know. Now is what is important. I realize the limitations of our society. I realize that most people aren't even bourgeois, they're just nothing. We've lost our bourgeois in America; we don't have a bourgeois here anymore, we've got the yuppies, and this cult and that cult, and this race of people and that race of people. Our

country is not all Americans, where France was all French and where Belgium was all Belgians. Here we have such a melting pot of people. I could work here for the next hundred years, and I bet you that 95 percent of the people in the United States would never see it or see any other art. It just keeps going on, and they probably would never know about it, ever. Because they're-- It's not football, it's not baseball, it's not athletics, it's not boating, it's not surfing, it's not Chinese, it's not Japanese, it's not Mexican. And there's only a handful of us American artists, California American artists, left. Where's our audience? A handful of people. So what bourgeois? There isn't anymore bourgeois. Everybody is battling against being bourgeois in California. They've got to be yuppies, or they've got to be something. There's no time for the bourgeois. They're dead or on their last leg of--maybe in their eighties, maybe in rest homes or someplace. Very few of them left.

SMITH: You mean traditional bourgeois?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: There's still stockbrokers and real estate agents, and all that kind of thing.

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. They're beyond the bourgeois, I think. Because half of them have already been-- I bet half of the stockbrokers and half of the real estate people

have been through the hippie movement, and they lived in all of this ferment. They've probably been on all sorts of acid trips, and they've changed into different personalities because the fad changed. That's the problem here with our society here, the fads. So the bourgeois doesn't exist. It never existed in California; we never had one in the beginning, I don't believe. Not in the sense of the bourgeois, who were closed-minded burghers. We never had burghers.

SMITH: Well, we had Warren Dorn saying that Cézanne was a secret communist plot.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Back in the fifties.

WAGNER: Well, true. You mean in the time of McCarthy.

SMITH: The McCarthy period, when modern, contemporary--

WAGNER: Well, that was Hollywood they were after, right? The film directors and the producers.

SMITH: Right, but they also said contemporary art, abstract expressionism was communism.

WAGNER: Well, of course, maps of strategic areas that the Russians wanted for blowing up the United States. That was insanity, not bourgeois. That was coming from Councilman Harold Harby's office. He was the one. He was the one who was accusing them. He was accusing Bernard Rosenthal's sculpture on the police building with the faces that are

faceless of being communist because they didn't have faces. He wanted the sculpture to be all people; nobody especially, just all people. He wanted that torn down because that was really a communist piece. During the WPA [Works Progress Administration] times a lot of the old communist artists were working on the murals here in the museum, down in the old museum restaurant. [Edward] Biberman. All around the different WPA projects. They were all fighting at that time for-- "We need money, us artists." Well, most of them made more money during the Depression than they made in years. [laughter] They hadn't been paid before.

SMITH: There's another aspect of surrealism that I want to see how you relate to, which is the question of spontaneity, the automatic painting, short-circuiting consciousness. How does spontaneity and non-consciousness fit into your work methods?

WAGNER: Well, in my earlier works I used lots of spontaneity in my assemblages, you know, the object related to some other object with nothing really in mind, just building it up, purely coming from spontaneity, right out of nowhere, you know. That still is a very important thing in my work, spontaneity. It looks like it's frozen. Like this piece here is totally spontaneous, yet it looks frozen. But everything that went in there came off of the

walls, or in boxes, or in junk, or that I found around, and it all came together into a spontaneous composition because-- The only concept in that whole piece here--

SMITH: This is a work in progress that you're doing, now.

WAGNER: This was a ship. I wanted it to go disappear through the edge of the painting and come out down out of a fireplace. So what was the fireplace in the painting, what environment was I going to put that in? I held the concept of the ship in the painting and the ship in the fireplace; the rest was a spontaneous experience of the piano and the table and the cards and the saxophone. When I saw the piano and the saxophone, then I got thinking about **The Music Room** and related to it. Cards and haphazard beer cans and things, like a man who lived in this room. I've known many who live in a single room where things are in a bit of disarray. But they have the things they like around them: cards or chess games or beer cans they don't quite clean up, pianos maybe, musical instruments lying around. So it's a room of a man who's obviously a bachelor, but that comes spontaneously. Everything has to come through spontaneity, because it's automatic. It is. It's like automatic writing; it's like automatic painting. You let it flow from in you out.

SMITH: What is the role of revision in your work? Polish, revision, redoing?

WAGNER: Well, it's only, to me, editing.

SMITH: Editing, right.

WAGNER: Editing your chaos. What you can do is you can take your chaos and put it there in an automatic way, spontaneous, and then you can notice the way it's thrown down or the way it appears. There's some elements or forms or lines or shapes or objects that get in the way of the other, so it's only a matter of moving them or removing them. You can say the whole message many times with less than a whole lot of things. Less is more. So that's reorganizing the chaos and editing your automatic concept, painting. It's removing a whole area that's too busy, and when that area is removed, there's something over here that's too strong, so you take that out. So the form that's left becomes stronger rather than surrounded by a lot of redundant things. So it's removing things of the chaos or the automatic painting, automatic writing. You automatically write something and you leave it, wham. You'll go back and read it, maybe, and that's a redundant line, you throw it out, right? Same thing.

SMITH: Have you ever been in psychoanalysis?

WAGNER: No, never in my life. I've never been in their office. I have no reason to want to go, or any idea of going.

SMITH: Psychoanalytic theory, again, was a big part of

surrealism. Have you been interested in it just from a literary point of view, from a theoretical point of view?

WAGNER: Well, I think [Sigmund] Freud did more to destroy our culture than probably any psychologist that's ever been around. Through sexual libido drives, and placing that above all things, and the dream and the automatic writing and the subconscious through cocaine and opium that he used. I've known-- My wife is the victim of a Freudian psychologist, and her husband was, too. Broke up their marriage.

SMITH: Her first husband?

WAGNER: Um-hmm. It's not all the way it should be. Although Freud at that time was very big with the surrealists, with Breton, because he was doing these things. He was talking about automatic writing and automatic painting and automatic creativity. If [Carl] Jung would have been around at that time-- Jung was still not there; he was a student of Freud. If Jung would have been around at that time, I'm sure that the surrealists would have picked up on Jung a lot faster. Because Jung had a lot more to say about the whole, the harmony, the universal harmony, and the quaternity, and all the symbols of man through dream and vision, and the mandalas, and the working of the human mind from the alchemists. He covered so much that Freud didn't bother with, you know. Freud

meant well, but Jung went way beyond that, he went up into the unconscious in a different method. So I wouldn't want to be analyzed by-- I know a lot of Jungians, and my work has always been appealing to Jungians. I only have met a couple of Freudian psychologists, and they seem very confused to me about my art. They were the ones-- One of them said one time, actually, just like William Wilson, he says, "You're only interested in death, sex, and religion." And that was from a Freudian psychologist. But a Jungian psychologist says, "How can you possibly have a full life and understand anything if you have no interest in sex, death and religion," which is the opposite of Freud.

SMITH: Something else I wanted to discuss is the relationship of your interest in surrealism to the piers, Hermosa Beach, Redondo Beach, POP [Pacific Ocean Park]. You mentioned once that the pier, the carnival, is a form of people's surrealism. Could you go into that more? What did you mean by that? What's people's surrealism?

WAGNER: You mean like amusement piers? Things of that nature?

SMITH: Yeah. Well, carnival in general, of which the amusement piers are a particularly Anglo-Saxon form.

WAGNER: Well, as far as the carnivals and the piers and the palaces of gaiety, the distances of the sea and the

skies, and the structures, and the loneliness, and the beach, and the feeling of the mist, that's what I'm interested in. I don't care about the people on the pier; they mean nothing to me at all, because they're not surreal, it's the environment that's surreal. Like the cities that almost float out of the sea, sometimes they're almost projected in the sky at different times, how you can see them from distances.

SMITH: **Firaskew.**

WAGNER: But not too close. There'd be a dreamlike quality to them. They don't exist anymore. There isn't any. They have been destroyed. But the people who worked in the carnival are just people. The ones that went there were just people. A lot of people that I wouldn't have any desire to ever know or care about.

SMITH: But in an interview that you gave with this newspaper in Eugene, Oregon, you do refer to the piers and carnival as a form of people's surrealism, you use that term.

WAGNER: Well, the carnival and the penny arcade was a stimulation to me. And the pier. But as illusion, as chance.

SMITH: You went on to say that surrealism was the common man's art, it wasn't an elite form of art.

WAGNER: Absolutely. It's the common man's art. It's the

only art that is the common man's art, because a very unschooled person can make a dream, draw dreams, he doesn't have to go to an academy, to a certain type or school of art. And primitivism, and folk art, all those things sort of tied together, like African art, Hopi art, the kachinas and masks. All these things are art of man, and to me they all relate to the surrealist movement. They're made by man; they're not made for art. Like the African art and the American Indians, they're made for religions purposes, for symbols of power and energy. They're made by a man specially, or a man makes something very strange and weird for his child. An old man makes buildings and things. But they can be very surreal. It's the art of the people. And when I'm talking about the decoration of the penny arcades and the piers and whatnot, they're made--they were constructed with very surreal colors and illusions within them. But the people weren't. What I'm getting at, the people were not that were there, but the environment was.

SMITH: Could you define surreal? What do you mean by surreal? What does the word surreal mean?

WAGNER: Actually, surrealism was coined up by [Guillaume] Apollinaire as a word. It's actually manifesting your work from the unconscious. That's what it amounts to. If I wanted to tell you the elements of what surrealism actually means to me as a person, and to most people, it has about

five or six elements that make something surreal.

SMITH: Okay.

WAGNER: One is always, usually, the juxtaposition of objects not related to one another, common and uncommon objects in a different context so they wouldn't actually ever be together. Humor, chance, a riddle, a rebus. A quality, and many times atmosphere, of distances in nature. All of these things. And probably the one that is the most important of all, I'm almost forgetting, is irrationality. It must be irrational to the logical mind.

SMITH: We talked about Henry Miller before, his important influence on you. How do you, at this point in your life, relate surrealism to Henry Miller? Do you see a connection there?

WAGNER: Well, Henry Miller's dead. Henry Miller did watercolors, and Henry Miller wrote wonderful books that I loved. I can't actually say there's much parallel between what Henry Miller was doing and myself in any way except his philosophy, which I still think is a very important philosophy.

SMITH: Which is?

WAGNER: What he wrote is certainly enough to keep me going for a lifetime as far as my attitude toward society.

SMITH: Which is?

WAGNER: He wrote a letter once to Emil Schnelling and

said, "Let them have their automobiles--their tin buggies, and let them have their boob tubes, and let them have all these things. What you have to do, Emil, is to sit down, stop making watercolors, and start painting, because you're temporizing. Get rid of the material world." I have no use for the material world to this day. I'm not interested in new cars, or any of this. I'm still detached from that aspect of it, new things. I don't own any new things. I never bought a piece of furniture in my life, ever. I can never remember buying a new piece of furniture, a shiny object, because I don't like shiny, glittering things.

SMITH: Well, let's get back to your boxes and your work in the seventies and eighties. I think at this point we ought to perhaps talk about dream narratives, what those are in your scheme of things.

WAGNER: Well, that would be starting, probably, when? 'Seventy-four? 'Seventy-five? How I really got into the dream narrative was Virginia. She told me that I should leave the found-object side after coming back from Belgium and start working with my dreams, drawing them and writing them and developing whatever came out of those. My first narrative dreams were railroad dreams. I used to have a dream about maybe once every month about these wonderful trains that were part horse and part locomotive, or they were prancing steeds, or they were sulky pacers, and they

were rocker-arm trains. They ran on different tracks and time, and they were so fast that you could hardly see them go. They just, [whistles] shoo, shoo. I called them the squiggle trains in the corners of my eyes. The first thing I did was try to tie them down into some kind of-- What do they look like actually if I take them out of my dream? Can I manifest these into trains with horse and locomotives with prancing steeds? So I pretty much could. I developed them, and I had them carrying clouds, trains with clouds all inside. I had them coming out of things, out of walls, off the tops of mantelpieces and fireplaces. They were big boxes. The one that is in New Mexico--it's owned by Meg Heydt--was probably the first one that came off. It was a mantelpiece with these horse-locomotive trains traveling across the mantel with a mirror, and down below was a rocker-arm train coming out of the fireplace. It was called **The Trains in the Corners of My Eye**. It was the first actual piece, probably, that I could manifest from a dream into an actual box. That was the starting point. Then I took fragments of all of these dreams and railroad stations and whatnot, and they started to come out. The more I started to find these elements within myself of these buildings and archways, the more I could get inside of it. Then labyrinths started appearing. As the labyrinths started appearing, things started to relate to

the labyrinths. I'd make the labyrinths and I'd go into infinity places with these things. I just kept letting it grow. All my dreams that were direct dreams from writing it down in the morning, immediately after my-- Usually, I had my best dreams in that twilight sleep, in the last three or four minutes. I had wonderful dreams in the Silver Lake district, Echo Park. It was something about the place that fed me more dreams than I've ever had anyplace. Maybe the fact that I've manifested so many dreams, maybe I'm running out of imagery. I don't know. That was really the turning point, the drawing of the dreams. **Memories of the Future**, getting into that sort of thing.

SMITH: Had you written down your dreams previously to this?

WAGNER: No. No, I hadn't.

SMITH: You had done in the sixties the assemblages of the railroad imagery. Not trains, but the railroad imagery.

WAGNER: Parts and components.

SMITH: Did those come out of dreams?

WAGNER: No. No, they didn't. They came right out of the dump into a spontaneous thing. Whatever it was related. No, they did not come from any dream. They were just for real. What's happened. There were no narratives connected with those as far as-- It was just the overall thing that

did it.

SMITH: Were you remembering your dreams at that time? Were railroads part of your dreams at that time?

WAGNER: No, my dreams at that time were basically death dreams, the fear of death, funerals, and all of that sort of thing. But I didn't do anything with them in that way. I've made boxes about them, but I wasn't aware of the fact-- They were just there, these death dreams. Scared me to death, a lot of nightmares. I had those right up to the time that I was married to Virginia. She was the one that pulled me out of that. And I wrote it, the death dreams.

SMITH: You wrote those down.

WAGNER: Yeah, during that time. As far as working on the boxes, so many of them are fragments of my night journeys. Maybe just of one corner of a room or something, and whatever relates to that fragment goes into the narrative.

SMITH: Do the ships come from your dreams?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. Yes, I've had quite a few ship dreams. In fact, I had one just last night that was a wonderful ship dream. It wasn't on the ocean, it was in San Francisco. It started on Powell Street and followed the cable car right up to the top of--

SMITH: Nob Hill.

WAGNER: Jones [Street] over to Hyde [Street], and we went down the other side. But the buildings all moved and rocked and leaned while we were in this huge ship with my friend, Tom Fresh, who was the pilot of the ship. He was telling me about all of his girlfriends, and do I remember this girlfriend and that one. And he was piloting-- It was like the Love Boat, like Viking Line, like the Star Dancer, or one of those big ships. And here we were going down the hills of San Francisco. We made two or three corners; when we made the corner, we almost wiped out a while side of a building. [Laughter] That was last night's dream. That might be an interesting thing to manifest, you know?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Some day. That was direct. As for other dreams, I had a wonderful dream--

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SMITH: When we left off last week, we had been talking about surrealism and your first stay in Belgium. You stayed in Belgium the first time about four months, five months?

WAGNER: The first time, yeah, about that long, four months. Then I went to Amsterdam; came back to Belgium.

SMITH: Did Virginia [Copeland Wagner] join you there? Did the two of you live there for awhile?

WAGNER: I'm trying to remember where we were at that moment in Belgium, what had happened. Had I had an exhibition in Beligum yet?

SMITH: Yes.

WAGNER: At the [Galerij] Kaleidoscoop and the [Galérie] L'Angle-Aigu in Brussels and [Galerij] Te Zwarte Panter [in Antwerp]. Virginia was there. She was away for awhile, and then she came and joined me. I was there for about two months, and then she joined me in April.

SMITH: You returned back to Los Angeles. When you returned back to Los Angeles, did you continue making the constructed boxes?

WAGNER: Oh, yes. I really got into it a lot more when I got back from Belgium. I started making boxes more, fabricating the objects within them instead of using found

objects, because I was very much interested in getting into a more surreal context than just the objects themselves. My first shows in Europe, in Belgium, were with the object related to the box. I started fabricating-- This would be-- What year are we talking about?

SMITH: 'Seventy-three, '74, I guess.

WAGNER: 'Seventy-four. Yeah, that's when I did the series of things related to kings and queens and palaces, using very rational symbolism and very irrational situations within the boxes, using formats of chessboards and things that were rational and logical.

SMITH: Well, could you explain what you mean by "irrational."

WAGNER: Well, irrationality to me is when-- Actually, irrationality comes from the inside and doesn't make much sense to most people. It's not something that is all logically planned out, rationally planned out. It sort of comes off of the top of your head and has a lot of nonsense and riddles and puns and things of that nature within it. Where the actual box in its environment, like castle walls or moats or doorways or windows, all of these things are pretty much the structure of buildings, normal. But what went on within them, the actions of the trains crossing fireplaces and ships coming through doorways, kings and queens and balloons about to fall down if you took the

sword blade out from under them where they were balanced maybe on an egg in space, those kinds of things are not exactly what you call real or logical.

SMITH: You also began your playing card series, right, at this time?

WAGNER: That was later. My first actual group of boxes that I'd completed was in '74 when I had my exhibition at Silvan Simone Gallery in about '75. That was the first time that [William] Wilson was kind to me in a long time. He said, "Well, Wagner's onto something new," and he was quite happy with that series that I was into. It was a very positive statement, I was not concentrating on death, sex and religion, but more into the Alice-in-Wonderland world of miniature narratives in the surreal context in the box. So they were sort of minidramas and microcomedies and mental landscapes. That series was very well received at the Silvan Simone Gallery. Sold out the show, except for one piece that I didn't want to sell.

SMITH: I think the next thing I want to discuss is your leaving Echo Park and going up to San Francisco.

WAGNER: After nineteen years of living in my studio in Echo Park, my house, it was a blow, believe me, to pick up my whole world, put it into a public storage and walk away with nothing except a Volkswagen and a suitcase and decide to-- We had to do something, but didn't know what. They

sold the house that we were renting. There was nothing we could do, so we moved out and joined a friend of ours in Berkeley for about a month until we found another friend of ours who lived in San Francisco who was going away for three months. So we were able to stay in his house on Bush [Street] and Fillmore [Street]. That's when I had my exhibition at the Vorpal [Gallery]. And seeing that I lived in infinity, so to speak, with a "00000" zip code, that's what I called the exhibition, Halfway to Infinity. That's where I built that very large environment in the upstairs gallery that hadn't even been a gallery, it was just raw space. The Vorpal Gallery gave me that space up on the roof, up on the top loft, to set up this piece and have a show of my boxes. Well, he invested so much money in that, because he restored the whole gallery for me, tore down everything that was in the loft and rebuilt it, refinished the walls. So it was a brand new gallery by the time the opening came. He wanted to do it, but he didn't think he was going to be doing it that quickly. It was a good thing. It was a nice to have it in San Francisco, that same performance with the big box and the mirrors and the actors.

SMITH: That you had first developed in Oregon?

WAGNER: Right. The show went well, also, with it. Boxes all around it, about fifty boxes, as a matter of fact. It

was a huge space, something like 50 by 120 feet. You can get a lot of art in it, and it still didn't look crowded.

SMITH: Then you moved out to Sebastopol?

WAGNER: Yeah. This friend of ours, he's an assemblage artist; I've known him for years, another West Coast assemblage artist. Raymond Barnhardt, and his wife, Gen. They were going to Spain for three months, so they said, "How would you like to come stay in our house? You can use my studio for three months while we're in Spain."

"Well, it sounds like a great idea. I've never been to Sebastopol."

When we got there, it was a paradise. I've never lived in a place quite so beautiful, with this huge studio that Raymond just cleared out of a whole big section. So I had plenty of room to work and check out all of Northern California. And it's so beautiful around there. He had about seven acres and a few apple trees and other gardens. So we got out in nature, and we could work in the garden and we could work in the studio.

SMITH: What kind of boxes were you doing in San Francisco and Sebastopol?

WAGNER: Exactly what I had been doing, the same sort of boxes: making things inside, fabricating the objects, and building, still, surreal boxes, until I got interested-- In Sebastopol a thought came to me, I would love to do a

series of playing cards. I would like to do the whole deck of cards, but I felt that fifty-two boxes might be a little bit wearing, so I divided up the cards. My first suit of cards were acrylics, small acrylic paintings about 8-1/2 by 11 [inches] on the "Suit of Circles." I developed that while I was in Sebastopol. I did one suit of the cards in circles. Then I worked on boxes at the same time, so I did about ten boxes and thirteen acrylics in Sebastopol.

SMITH: One of the influences, maybe influence is the wrong word, but in your conversation, you mentioned that you have been deeply impressed by Joseph Cornell. When did you really become aware of Cornell's work?

WAGNER: I think my earliest time that I'd really looked at Cornell was about 1947 in the Copley Gallery in Beverly Hills. It was a surrealist gallery, and it was managed by Bill [William] Copley and Doris Copley. They handled nothing but surrealist artists, from Max Ernst to Man Ray to [René] Magritte to Cornell to Dorothea Tanning Ernst and so many of the surrealists. At that time is when I first looked at the first Cornell boxes. And they were very reasonable; I think I could have picked one up for about twenty-five dollars at the time.

SMITH: But an intense interest in Cornell didn't develop until much later?

WAGNER: No, as a matter of fact, I knew Cornell was there,

but he never really stimulated me in his way. Cornell was a man that I started to really read about in the seventies--

SMITH: After he had died, yeah.

WAGNER: --when the books really came out on Cornell. Dore Ashton and some of these different writers put out wonderful books on him. I realized then that Cornell and I had a lot in common in many ways. We were both living in another world, not a world of this time, but of other times, other places, and partially there isn't any other place, you're just living there, if not identifiable to it. Cornell was basically interested in dancers, ballet, ballerinas, and he was interested in star charts. He was a Christian Scientist. He loved old memorabilia. He loved sort of decadence. He loved anything French. He was a great admirer of [Stéphane] Mallarmé, [André] Breton and all the French poets, and he was very involved in all that. He used lots of French in his boxes: the words and the hotels and the places and collecting different objects and collage in his boxes from the French. Although he'd never been to France. He'd never been out of Flushing [New York] except I think to go to Manhattan to take some boxes in a paper sack to the Janus Gallery and to collect objects maybe in junkstores that he could find. He loved all of the ballerinas, and he did things for Dance magazine, covers

and whatnot. Most of his work was actually constructed for his brother, Robert, who was in a wheelchair. He used to run up and down his three-story house at 3708 Utopia Parkway from the cellar to the top, up to the attic. He had things going at all these levels. He was a recluse, actually. He stayed home except when he went to the Christian Science church, quite regularly; I think it was daily. I loved the way they described his head as if he was a chambered nautilus with sort of-- His whole mind went out to infinity. Cornell's work is like mine in one way: women love our works. Women are the ones who collect our works, not men. It's very interesting that women love boxes. It was the same with Cornell. At one point Octavio Paz and Max Ernst and their wives, and somebody else showed up with them, and-- Cornell took the wives upstairs to see his boxes and let Octavio Paz and Max Ernst talking downstairs because he knew they wouldn't be interested in his work at all. So he kept it sort of for women.

He set up his whole house one time as a party for Zizi Jean-Mère, the ballet dancer from the French Roland Petit company at the time. He loved her, but he never met her, so he prepared his house with all boxes and decorations to give her a party. She came to the party, but he disappeared; he never met her. He was that type of person, too shy.

He was telling us about what he really loved about dance and about shooting-gallery birds and about soap-bubble kits and rings and all of this astrology and mythology and the things that he was into. They were sort of alchemical almost, magic, and his sand fountains, and all these different wonderful collages he made with almost alchemical symbols. Although inside of the whole thing, there was usually somebody that he admired. He took Magritte's postcard, I remember, and rearranged it and altered it, the one called **Time Transfixed**, with the train coming out. He loved Magritte's wife, Georgette; although he'd never met her, he loved her. She was a beautiful person, and he loved the image of the person. I don't think he actually could really-- He never really wanted to know the person, although he did in many cases, with some of the poets. But he had trunks full of old poetry by some remote poets and dossiers in his garage just solid with butterflies and objects and balloons and circles and rings and star charts. When he died, I was in Sweden having my opening at the Konstsalongen Kavalletin, and they told me that Cornell had just died. It was '71, I think. I was very disappointed about that because I had never had a chance to meet Cornell. I had always wanted to, but I never got around to it. We're going back now to when I was still in Echo Park. When I was having my show in New York

and staying in Jamaica with my friend who was a painter, Vitas Sakalofski, I said, "Vitas, someplace around here-- You must live close to Flushing."

He said, "Oh yeah, it's only about ten blocks away."

I said, "Do you know where Utopia Parkway is?"

He said, "Of course."

"Well, I'm going to go to see Cornell's house."

"Where does he live there?"

"3708."

"Oh, let's go tomorrow. We'll go in the afternoon."

We got in his old bus and took off for the Utopia Parkway. He lived in a community that was like Europe, Dutch houses and wonderful houses. I felt like I was in Belgium or someplace. It didn't seem like anyplace else in Europe. So I could see where he could get all this energy through this kind of architecture. We walked-- There was somebody in the garage with a car, and we walked over to the man next door. He says, "You looking for somebody?"

And I said, "Yeah. I was admiring the house here of Joseph Cornell."

"Oh, yeah? You like the guy?"

And I said, "Yes, I found him to be quite a nice artist." I said, "Did you know him?"

"My wife knows him."

I said, "Do you own anything of his?"

"Oh, yeah, a few things."

I said, "They're worth a lot of money now, you know."

He said, "You mean to tell me people pay money for the crap he did?"

Finally, the wife came out. She said, "I've known Joseph ever since I was four years old, and my son used to work with Joseph and help him with his boxes to treat the outsides. I'll show you something." She brought this box out and a collage and two or three other things. She said, "The last we saw of Joseph was at Christmas Eve. That was his birthday, and every year he loved to celebrate Christmas Eve on his birthday. We invited him to come over to our house for a big party for him and for everybody, and he phoned up at about ten minutes before the party started and he says, 'I don't really want to come over. There'll be too many people there, and I don't want to talk to people.'" So he never showed up for the party, and he died right after that.

So Joseph, his philosophy is parallel to mine, but with a different message. We both have that same inner feeling about poetry and threads of our life parallel each other. His father was a Dutchman like mine; he comes from a Dutch family. I would like to have actually met him.

SMITH: Recently there's been some discussion in the art

critical circles about the importance of the grid in twentieth-century art, and Cornell's name of course comes up frequently as an artist who has imposed a grid framework upon what he was doing, similar, in a sense, to [Piet] Mondrian or any number of artists, actually. Is the grid framework important in your work, would you say?

WAGNER: Well, if you're actually squaring things off like this one or that one with the spiderweb for a grid instead of this [rectangular] grid.

SMITH: What's the name of that piece there?

WAGNER: That is called **The Staircase**, the suitcase with the stairs coming out of it with a grid. For awhile there, for about, oh, several years ago, I used to adapt the grid a lot to my work. It was a way of killing the space that you were afraid was too dull. It did liven up a distance. This one has a grid. No, this one doesn't have a grid. No, I guess I don't have any with grids at present. Except this one is an example.

SMITH: With the suitcase. And what's the name of the spider--

WAGNER: But I've used the spiderweb as a grid.

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: Rather than the actual 90-degree grid.

SMITH: Your use of windows and portals and that, are they also a form of grid for you?

WAGNER: Yeah, right, they're setting up a negative space. The grid has a tendency to strengthen many works that would lose itself if it was just blank. A grid pulls things forward so that everything behind it goes back. It's like looking through jail bars.

SMITH: It's a form of control of the space, then. I wanted to move on to the subject of you and Virginia becoming involved with Catholicism. That began when you were--

WAGNER: In Sebastopol.

SMITH: In Sebastopol?

WAGNER: Yeah, that's where I was at that moment. I was working in my studio when Virginia came home one afternoon, and she said, "I've just met a wonderful Jesuit priest who agreed to trade Alexander [technique] lessons." And he said, "What could I do for you?" And she said, "Well, I'd like to learn something about the Catholic church and about religion, on that matter."

SMITH: What were your religious leanings at that time?

WAGNER: At that time we were pretty much into the Oriental philosophies, into the Taoist. That was our favorite of all that we'd tried. We'd gone through Hinduism and Buddhism, and we found that Taoism seemed to be the one we loved the most, because it had the most balance and was closer to what we knew. Because living with the Indians,

that was more or less their philosophy; it was almost a Lao-tze philosophy, all their myth and their quaternities. The Jungian way. It all tied together.

SMITH: So what was your reaction to Virginia's interest in trading lessons for--

WAGNER: I was pretty unhappy with the whole situation. I said, "I'll tell you: you can do whatever you want with it, but don't count me in on joining up with any church. I don't want any part of it." I'd been through it in my life with my first wife and my kids, and I didn't like the way the church was operating. I didn't like the parish life or the community or anything about it at that time. I used to have to go as a duty, being married to my first wife, who didn't go, I had to go to take my children. My first wife was a Catholic. We were married in the Catholic church in the Carmel mission, but she never really wanted to go to church. She was turned off by the church from childhood, and so that made it very difficult for me because I would have to take my daughters. I thought that I was a Catholic, or had been; when I went in, they gave me communion. It was so long ago, I couldn't remember, but I knew I didn't want it. I battled it with Virginia, all kinds of pros and cons, about why would you want to do this thing?

She said, "I'm going to go and find out more."

And I said, "You go right ahead, but don't count me in on any of it."

SMITH: So she began to study Catholicism. What led you to decide to investigate it for yourself?

WAGNER: Well, I was invited to mass at Saint Ignatius [de Loyola] Church at USF [University of San Francisco] by the Jesuit who was talking with Virginia, Father Swain.

SMITH: What's his first name?

WAGNER: Father Arthur Swain. After the mass we would have lunch. This we did, and I remember him saying to me--the first thing he said to me when he met me--"What's a nice guy like you hanging around a place like this for?" So we had lunch. He was very brilliant, good sense of humor, laughed all the time; I enjoyed it. Then we went across the street to the Carmelite monastery where the cloister is, the [Monastery of] Cristo Rey is the name of it, where there's about twenty-one Carmelite nuns of the order established by Saint Teresa of Avila. We talked with them. Father Swain was their confessor, so he introduced us to the reverend mother and her assistant, and they were just charming women. They were from Mexico; they had to get out of Mexico at the time of the revolution. They came to America, and they'd been in the Cristo Rey ever since.

SMITH: They were quite elderly, then, at this time.

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. The reverend mother, she must be about

seventy-eight, she looks about thirty right now. Not a line on her face; she looks like a young girl. Incredible person, wonderful energy. So we talked to them for awhile. They were just-- I was really impressed by these women, but I couldn't understand how they could live all their lives within this enclosure with never knowing anything about what was going on in the outside world, never. They know nothing about anything in the outside the world except zip codes. They mail things a lot, but they don't know-- They say, "That zip code, oh yeah, that's in North Beach, isn't it?" or, "That's in the Richmond district," or "That's in Sea Cliff", or "That's up in the Haight-Ashbury. Where's the Haight-Ashbury, Gordon? We've heard so much about that from time to time." Well, Haight-Ashbury is actually about three blocks down the hill and across the panhandle, about five blocks away, but they didn't exactly know where it was.

SMITH: They never leave the walls of the cloister?

WAGNER: Only in an emergency. It was very interesting, that life within that cloister. It's probably one of the most beautiful places in San Francisco; I mean, once you see it. It just illuminates with light, just drips with light, it's so beautiful. So they gave us each a rosary and how to say it. They gave Virginia a book on the life of Saint Teresa of Avila to read. Their blessed mother--

their holy mother, rather, is Saint Teresa of Avila. Then we left and went back to Sebastopol. Virginia kept going to Father Swain and I kept working in my studio. The thing of it was that Gen Barnhardt had some of the writings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila in her library because she was a Catholic. The sculptor, Ray's wife.

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: So we started going to the churches around there on Sunday, not receiving any communion, but just going, seeing what it was like. Went to Sebastopol one Sunday, we'd go to Bodega the next Sunday, we'd go to Petaluma, we'd go to Santa Rosa; we'd go to different ones and see what it was like and how it felt, you know. All the time, every Sunday we would go, in Sebastopol, just on a little drive someplace. We found that the people were so incredibly friendly and so loving that it must be something wrong. The priests were so nice, and they talked about things that--there was no hellfire and brimstone; there was none of that sort of thing going on. Good sense of humor, good wit. There was something happening within us at that moment. I was still resisting the actual idea of any organization of any kind, because I've never belonged to anything; I don't believe in organizations, and I was always a nonorganization man. So it was a battle going on

within me.

SMITH: Then what happened?

WAGNER: We left Sebastopol.

SMITH: There was something that was appealing to you, but it sounds like it was more on an aesthetic level than a spiritual level.

WAGNER: Well, of course, because in Mexico I used to go to the church every day and sit down by myself. I loved the Latin mass; I loved the chanting; I loved the mysticism and the things that you couldn't see. Logical people can't accept mysticism and the mythical. Being an irrational person, it was easy for me to pick up on these things. Because this story about Jesus Christ and the Lord in the Bible, the Old Testament and all of the Gospels, verse and everything that goes with it-- Either there's about nine hundred million, almost a billion, Catholics that are really suckers to the biggest lie in the world, or it's the truth. So if it's the truth, then you've got to go along with it. So what are you going to do? I'm going to just go along and accept the fact that it is and have that kind of faith. It's faith, that's all it is. You either believe it or you don't believe it. You don't have to analyze it, it's an aesthetic thing. It was the same thing when I'd sit in the church in Mexico, I had faith. If I didn't have faith I couldn't be an artist all my life, I

would have given it up for the material world thinking, "I can't make it as an artist. I won't have any money; I'm going to starve to death. I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that." I never thought that way. I just keep doing what I have to do. It's sort of an assistance to me to be able to do what I do now and know that I have faith and that I'd turn it over to the Lord. I do not turn it over to myself; I am not running my show, He's running it.

But to get back to Sebastopol: We left Sebastopol, and when Virginia came home, she said to Gen, "Boy, I sure loved your books. I read Saint John of the Cross and I'm thinking about becoming Catholic."

Gen turned around and said, "Well, join the club."

So we went over to San Francisco then. We were invited to stay in Mary Jane Staymate's house on Sutter [Street] and Fillmore [Street], where she gave us the whole top floor except her bedroom. We had a big bedroom in the front, and then there was another room, and then there was a small room that was Mary Jane's bedroom. There was an unfinished kitchen and deck, and that was turned over to me for my studio because it was empty. It was a big room, so I had plenty of room; it was like thirty by thirty feet. So I could work there, I worked in that studio. I had to wait until she would get up in the morning so I could pass

through her bedroom to the studio, there was no other way in. Sometimes she didn't get up until nine o'clock and I'd be up at six, so I'd have to contemplate and think and do something else. She wasn't very much in favor of the Catholic church; she was a good Presbyterian, in the choir. But she was a very kind person, and she was a fighter for the community, and she was against HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development]; she was trying to stop a housing development in San Francisco. All these kinds of things; she was working on projects. She was from Arizona. She was a strong woman. She had a beautiful Queen Anne house.

Well, Virginia was going on studying with Father Swain. She finally asked me if I would come and talk--he asked if I would come and talk to him about things, get something going once a week. I didn't want to do it, wasn't interested. But the way it worked out, I finally condescended to go once a week to go talk with him for one hour. And he said, "I'm not going to do the talking, you're going to do the talking. You tell me what's on your mind about this church." So for about ten weeks, I think, everytime I talked with him, I told him everything I didn't like about the church and about the people involved in the church and the way the church operated in-- Any organization I didn't like, no matter what. But it seemed

to me that he was able to get around all those things; he always came out on top of the argument. So we found that it was really quite an interesting battle between Father Arthur Swain and myself.

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MARCH 7, 1987

SMITH: Were there religious things beginning to appear in your art? In terms of your boxes, were you beginning to deal with religious subjects?

WAGNER: Nothing, no. Nothing whatsoever was appearing in my boxes except what I was doing. When I was at that period, when I was arguing with him, I was going to [see Swain], I was making boxes. I made about, oh, fifteen boxes in that three months we stayed with Mary Jane. I guess it was more than that, almost six. I made the "Suit of Squares" playing cards, thirteen acrylics for the "Suit of Squares." Yeah, I started that.

Then I had a big exhibition coming up in L.A. at the Downey Museum [of Art] that Lukman Glasgow had invited me to. So we took off from San Francisco; we came back down to L.A. and stayed with a friend of ours out in the [San Fernando] Valley in Woodland Hills, a painter, Pat Benefield, a surrealist painter, a very good one. We stayed there for probably about a month, and I worked on some more boxes there. She had a place where I could work. As a matter of fact, I built that box over there, **The Gemini Lady**, at her place, and this one out there.

SMITH: What's the name of that one?

WAGNER: That's Georgette.

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: We only stayed with her temporarily because we were going to go to Belgium.

SMITH: So you returned to Belgium to have a show there?

WAGNER: Well, I didn't know what was going to happen. Prior to that they had given me an exhibition, oh, probably about a year before, and they'd sold about ten or fifteen pieces for me out of that show in the Architektenhuis in Gent. They had money in the bank in Brussels for me, and it amounted to something like, oh, I forget how many Belgian francs, but it amounted to $5,000 American. So it was possible for us to go, and live there without spending any American dollars. So we decided we would go with nothing really in mind except to go and see what was going on, check it out. So that was an experience, going to Belgium, getting there and being there the first-- You wouldn't want me to discuss that would you?

SMITH: Well, we discussed your going to Belgium before.

WAGNER: This time going to Belgium was a whole different experience.

SMITHWAGNER: In what sense?

WAGNER: Well, I've never been treated like that in any other country in the world. We took off on the airplane from LAX [Los Angeles International Airport] and arrived in London at twelve noon, and from London to Brussels, and we

got there about three thirty their time, which is about an hour difference, really, in flight. I got there, and there wasn't any-- I figured that they knew we were coming, I figured somebody would be there to meet us. Nobody was around. We couldn't get out of the customs line. So then when we did come up to the customs, they don't open anything up anyway, they say, "How long are you staying?"

I said, "Oh, probably three or four months."

"Oh, that's okay, go ahead."

And we tried to find where we were going to stay. You know, when you got jet lag like that, it's hard to come out of the Brussels airport and wonder where you're going the first night. To get to Brussels it was thirty dollars, to get to here it was thirty dollars, the hotel was thirty dollars. I said, "Forget it. How do you get to Gent?"

"A Sabena bus."

So we looked all over for the Sabena bus. I've got tools and equipment and all my tool box and stuff to work; I'm going to work there. The man says, "You get it over there," so we wheeled everything over there. "No, up there," back and forth. We finally found the Sabena bus, right in front of the station as you walk out the door. We got on a Sabena bus, Virginia and I and one more man going to Sint Maartens Latem, that was it--and the bus driver; that was the total amount to go from Brussels to

Gent. We got to Gent about six o'clock at night. I said, "I'll go down to our old hotel," where we used to stay sometimes, the [Hotel] du Progrès, when we first went to Gent a couple of times before we got settled. I carried the tool boxes and everything down the street, and I said, "You wait here, Virginia, I'll come back and get you in case--" I get down there and everybody was welcoming me. I hadn't seen these people since 1973; this was 1979, and they were shaking hands like I hadn't been gone all those years. I asked them if they had a room. "Oh no, no rooms. Just put your stuff back there and keep it for a while." So I put it in the back room with the birds. I went back up and called my friend Lucien [Cornelis]. He says, "Gordon--" Yeah, he came right down and kissed me three times, and he says, "You're on time. I thought you weren't coming. We're waiting for you."

I said, "For what?"

"You're having an opening tonight."

I said, "Where?"

"In the Artemis Galerij."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Where were you? We sent the daughter of the govenor of West Flanders, the Countess [Régine van Outryve d'Ijderwalle] van Odenheim, to fetch you at the airport. The airport printed a big sign for her because the one she

had was too small, with your name on it. You didn't see it?"

I said, "No".

"She said she waited for over forty-five minutes." (And all the time we're back in customs.) "She came to fetch you."

I said, "When is this opening?"

"Eight o'clock. You have to eat. Annie [Niset] has all this soup. We're going to have a feast."

I said, "Part of my luggage is in the du Progrès."

"Okay, we go and get that." We had a beer and talked for a couple of minutes, and then we went over there.

We went back, and here's all my friends from all these years back all at the opening. After the opening closed at ten o'clock, they said, "The countess of the castle of [Baron Donj du Lovendegem] van Odenheim is having a party, and you are invited as one of the honored guests, the artists. It's necessary that you go there."

I said, "Van Odenheim? That's out by Zottegem and Zomergem. That's about twenty miles out of town."

"Yeah, that's right."

"You mean we got to go there? We're a little tired."

"No, you've got to go, it's important."

We get out there, and it's a beautiful night, the

stars are all shimmering. We drive up this tree-lined--they call it a dreef, the tree-lined roads to the castle, over the drawbridge, the moat, into the courtyard. There were all these towers and turrets and weathervanes, and the stars were twinkling. We got out and these big doors opened, and here is the countess, she is waiting, and she has two six-foot porcelain hunting hounds, dalmatian dogs on each side of her. She's bowing and sweeping Belgian-style, escorts us through the corridor with the kings' chairs and all of the velvets and the golds and the heraldry. We walk down this long hallway and down these winding stairs into the dungeon; that's where the party was. It was full of people. And she collected boxes. She had a fireplace that was wider than this room, and six of us stood in the fireplace and smoked cigarettes because the smoke went up the chimney, didn't offend anybody that didn't smoke. It was really something.

At two o'clock in the morning we were pretty tired, and Virginia was getting tired. And I said, "Lucien, we got to go pretty soon."

He said, "That's all right, we'll go."

We took off, and on the road two guys come alongside, "Let's stop for a beer down here in another pub."

"Forget it." It could have gone on for two weeks like this. This is a strange way to enter Belgium, with jet

lag, you know, to have that all happen on the first night you arrive.

Also, at that party I made the commitment-- These dealers were sticking money in my coat pocket, a thousand Belgian francs, two thousand. [laughter] I got all this stack of money. We made a commitment for me to have an exhibition on December 14 of that same year; this was October, or the middle of September, I guess. December 14 would be the time for the exhibition. That meant that I had to do some work while I was-- I couldn't fool around much. So we took a house in Belgium, in Gent, and I started working. I made the exhibition all right. That opened on December 14. It was very interesting, because I wasn't a Catholic yet, I was still on the outside of-- I wasn't one of them from the standpoint of-- Although we went to church every Sunday in Gent, never missed. Cold in the winter. They have big heating lamps in the churches on posts because they're big stone buildings, and they can get pretty cold. The birds are flying all over the roof, the pigeons and the doves. That night was where I was told that I was to construct **The Interior Castle** [also known as **The Castle of the Seven Dwelling Places**].

SMITH: Who told you?

WAGNER: He is one of the Carmelite priests at the Carmelite monastery in Gent. It's called the Centrum vor

de Bezeining, meaning the Center of Prayer. It was Carmelite men. So I was told by Père [Frans] Hoornaert that I was to build this castle. I said, "What kind of a castle is that?"

"Well, it's about-- It's by the book from Saint Teresa of Avila."

I said, "We have one at home, in Gent here."

"No, this is not the life, it is the interior castle."

I said, "I don't know anything about it."

"Don't worry about it, you'll find out, no problem. We're going to have a competition. We're going to invite artists from all over Belgium to submit their models, drawings, paintings of the interior castle. We will give 150,000 Belgian francs for the first award."

So my friend Lucien, who was-- We were going to collaborate on it. He was going to do part and I was going to do part. We thought that would be a good thing to do. We didn't know if it was a good idea; we didn't even know what it was. I barely knew anything about Saint Teresa of Avila, except what I'd learned in Cristo Rey. So all of the friends that were with him, "Oh, you'll like it. It's like your work, got lots of toads and snakes and demons." I mean, like Bosch, oh, yeah, that's right, like Bosch.

I said, "That does sound interesting."

It started from that night, which I found out later, December 14 is the feast day of the great Carmelite saint, John of the Cross. It was his feast day that my show opened in Gent. San Juan de la Cruz, who was with Teresa of Avila, you know, they were together. She asked for two priests to help her: Father Antonio and Saint John of the Cross. She looked at them, and one was a big man, and Saint John of the Cross was little. She said, "Ah, I have a priest and a half." [laughter] Saint John of the Cross was so small.

SMITH: So you had decided that you were going to build The Interior Castle for this competition?

WAGNER: Well, we discussed it. Lucien and I were going to collaborate.

SMITH: What kind of concept were you playing with?

WAGNER: I had none. Nothing.

SMITH: What did you know about what the interior castle was supposed to be?

WAGNER: I had no idea what it was. It's really hard to do anything until you understand what it's all about, right?

SMITH: You would think. So how did you find out what it was all about?

WAGNER: Oh, that was much later. That was a long time after I came back from Belgium. San Francisco and everything else.

SMITH: Let's continue. So you didn't The Interior Castle in Belgium.

WAGNER: Oh, no. No, I didn't even attempt it. I had no way of being able to understand the interior castle as it should be in Dutch. They didn't have the Spanish version, and they didn't have an English version.

SMITH: When people turned in their works for competition, did you see anything?

WAGNER: It never happened.

SMITH: Oh, it never happened.

WAGNER: They got in a lot of trouble in Belgium, financially.

SMITH: The church, or--

WAGNER: Just Belgium got in a financial bind. I guess they ran out of money to do that. That was a pretty tough time, 1980, in Belgium. It wasn't easy; they were taxing everybody, the land taxes, underneath their houses and on top of their houses, taxing the artists, taxing everything, you know. So it was really ruining the economy.

SMITH: Then you came back home to the United States after a while?

WAGNER: Came back to San Francisco and moved to the Richmond District, out by Sea Cliff, on California [Boulevard] and Twenty-eighth Avenue. I set up my studio there. I started reading about various and sundry saints

and whatnot. I started working on my playing card series; I did thirteen boxes on the "Suit of Keyholes" at that point and finished up a little more polish to the "Suit of Circles" and the "Suit of Squares." I just went over. So I had the whole series together, and I read a little bit.

SMITH: What kind of ideas were you working with in the "Suit of Keyholes"?

WAGNER: Boxes.

SMITH: Boxes, but that--

WAGNER: Thirteen boxes of puns.

SMITH: Okay.

WAGNER: Related to numbers. Take one, for example, a box that would be in the "Suit of Keyholes," **The Five of Keyholes.**

SMITH: Which was?

WAGNER: Well, it was actually in a room, like a kitchen, with a sink and a plumber's friend and a ship sinking down into the cabinet, into the dishtray, sinking. Up on the wall was written sinko, a pun on cinco. Such things as a golfer out in the country with a cow off in the distance, and he's swinging the golf club for four, and that sort of thing. There were a lot of puns, and yet they have that medieval feeling to them. It's the same kind of imagery that I would use in my boxes.

SMITH: The "Suit of Keyholes" was a series of boxes.

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, all thirteen of them.

SMITH: Then you continued with doing pun boxes, right? There was **Door Jam**.

WAGNER: Well, then I got into just plain pun boxes, but that was not in San Francisco. While I was in San Francisco, I was just doing the keyholes. That's when we went to Father Swain and completed our discussions. Virginia could not become a Catholic because she had had another marriage she would have to have annulled. She couldn't track down her former husband, he had disappeared and there were no papers. It took two years until a Chinese canon lawyer just went [whistles] shoo, shoo, and cleared the whole thing off down on Church Street, you know, at the archdiocese of San Francisco. Then we were allowed to get married in the church.

SMITH: But you had already become Catholics?

WAGNER: No. No, we weren't. And then we could become when we were allowed to-- At the final thing we went through all of the sacraments at once. And Virginia-- The way it was, I thought I was already cleared being married to one back down there, but I never knew exactly where I stood. I said I had been baptized, I'd had communion before at Carmel, at my wedding. He didn't ask me for these things, but Virginia had to go through it from scratch; she had to do everything. Baptized, first

communion, confession and confirmation, and marriage all five sacraments at once. We went through that in one day. Father Swain did it all in the baptistry in Saint Ignatius church with a couple of friends for witnesses. It took about twenty minutes, and then we went over and she had her first communion in the Carmelite monastery. The sisters all sang for us, and it was beautiful. They chant so well, you know, and they have an organ there, beautiful chanting. They did that for us privately the next morning with Father Swain as the celebrant of the mass. Then that solved that. That's when we got the book of The Interior Castle. I bought one in San Francisco, and it was so bad, I couldn't even understand what they were talking about. It was by another translator, Allison Peers. Didn't understand it; I just tossed it out.

SMITH: Why were you pursuing it?

WAGNER: Well, I sort of made a vow with Père Frans that I would do something about it. And the Carmelites, I told them about it in Cristo Rey, and they were so happy that it just had to be done, they knew that. It was going to be 1982 when it had to completed, not before.

SMITH: Who said that?

WAGNER: Well, that was when the four hundredth anniversary of the death of Teresa of Avila would be coming up. It was a festival for that. It was their feast. So it had to be;

it was that year. In Belgium they call it four hundred **jubeljaar**. Anyway, they gave me the book by a different writer, by Kieran Kavanaugh and [Otilio] Rodríguez.

SMITH: Different translators, you mean?

WAGNER: Right. That one started to interest me. The more I read it, the more I realized, "This woman is totally insane. Why am I even thinking about such things?" I just put it away.

SMITH: What do you mean by insane?

WAGNER: She was just mad, you know, madness. I couldn't understand what she was driving at.

SMITH: You like madness, so why would that put you off?

WAGNER: Well, no, but I couldn't see any way that I could manifest it into a three-dimensional work of art, you know, until I read the book about seven times. I kept reading it, and everytime I would read it, I would find, ah, there's an image, and I would make notes. I would keep writing down these notes. I'd go to each mansion of the seven mansions, and it took months and months. In the meantime, I'm doing everything else: I'm working on my keyhole boxes and other things, and I'm writing poetry and enjoying things and dreams, and I'm doing my normal thing. But I would set aside time to go through this, and I saw that there was no hope. I said, "But I've more or less made a commitment that I'm going to do this thing, and

there's something going to make me do this." I can't explain it.

Well, Virginia and I had been married, now, in the Catholic church. Father Swain said, "Well, your papers should be coming here pretty soon because-- I've got to have your baptismal papers from Carmel Mission and your--" or from Sacred Heart in Hollywood, where I went through my lessons with Father Ring, who was the head of USF [University of San Francisco], he was the dean later, Jesuit. Well, I got a letter from Carmel Mission, they said I was a heathen and never had any baptism and that I had a special dispensation.

SMITH: To get married the first time?

WAGNER: I showed this to Father Swain, he said, "Well, now what?" He'd married this woman-- "I'll be back." We were in the middle of a talk about things. He took off for the office, he said, "Come on, let's go." He got the secretary out of the office, and he got a girl walking down the hall. "Let's go, we're going to have a wedding." So we go back in the baptistry, and we go through the whole marriage again preceded by my baptism. We had to write out all the papers and send them down to the archdiocese and do it all over again. It was funny. He was laughing so hard. Anyway, so we were married again.

So Virginia and I were married by the I Ching in

Topanga Canyon. We were married by the justice of the peace in Albuquerque. We were married by Father Swain at [Saint Ignatius de] Loyola Church USF two times. So we've been married four times.

So **The Interior Castle** was on my mind all the time, but nothing was really happening, nothing was really developing. And I was starving to death; I was really on the bottom. I was paying $400 a month rent out there. I'd never paid that much. I'd been used to paying nothing or $200 a month all my life. The highest I ever paid was in Echo Park, from $80 to $200 they raised it. So $400 was--I couldn't believe it, that high. And Virginia was having a difficult time getting students. And artists in San Francisco, I don't know how they live there. They must starve to death. There is nothing going on for the artist as far as selling their art. It is a great place for them to work, but they've really got to get out and hustle. So I was so glad--

SMITH: Did you have a gallery in San Francisco.

WAGNER: Yeah, Vorpal [Gallery], but they weren't doing anything for me. I was so glad for this man to come along, Bill.

SMITH: Who is this man?

WAGNER: I'm trying to remember his name.

SMITH: No, but where--

WAGNER: He appeared from--Justine Fixel brought him over one afternoon and introduced me to this gentleman. We had a little lunch, and he looked at my work. "I've been waiting for this! For months I've been waiting for this," he said. "I wondered what I was going to do."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to give you an exhibition the end of this month."

And I said, "Where?"

He said, "At Cal State [California State University] Fresno. I'm the director of the gallery." He says, "I can't pay you much. I can give you $300 for the rental of your work, and I can give you a ten-page catalog and guarantee you about $300 for a lecture and pay for your time in Fresno."

I said, "How am I going to get this work down there?"

"I'm coming. I'll pick it all up. You don't have to do anything."

I said, "Yeah, but if I move back down to L.A.--"

"Same distance. I can bring it from Fresno to L.A. just as easy as San Francisco. Right in the middle, same distance. You just tell me where you want it to be."

So he moved all of my art for me, gave me this exhibition. We drove away with two suitcases and the

basket chair from the living room. That was all we had. Everything else in our apartment we either borrowed from people or found on the street, like boards and doors and sawhorses. I gave them away and gave back the things we borrowed, like chairs and chests of drawers. We walked away with nothing. Drove out of San Francisco-- Came back down to L.A. and stayed with a friend out in Canoga Park until we could find this house in Pasadena. That was in 1980, December, when we arrived here.

Bill [William E.] Minschew [Jr.] was his name, a friend of Justine and Lawrence Fixel. Great person. He lives up in Clovis, that's north of Fresno, up on a mountain. What a wonderful way-- Just like it was a miracle just landed. He took care of everything; we didn't have to do a thing, just drive away with our little bug. Take off for Fresno straight down to L.A. after we'd been there for about five days. And get paid for it to boot. I said, "Well, we're getting out of San Francisco. It starts in Fresno, where they start to recognize artists again." [laughter] It was miraculous, how that happened. Moved everything right out to where-- The show ended, and everything came to my friend's place where we were staying. It was easy.

SMITH: Well, let's get back to **The Interior Castle**. You were working from the book, but all you had was notes and a

deadline.

WAGNER: When I arrived here, it was December of 1980.

SMITH: And you knew you had to have it done in two years.

WAGNER: By '82.

SMITH: But not before '82?

WAGNER: I had to have it done, well, if possible-- Her actual feast day was November 15, 1982, but the year before they were going to be celebrating it all this time, you know, through '81. I wasn't coming up with anything. I was reading, reading, reading the book.

SMITH: Were you thinking of a series of boxes?

WAGNER: Oh, I was working on these pun boxes. Anything to escape **The Interior Castle**.

SMITH: I mean, in terms of **The Interior Castle**, were you conceiving it as a series of boxes?

WAGNER: I wasn't considering it anything. I had no idea at all what it was going to be. I knew how it wasn't going to be. I had a thousand ways of knowing how I wasn't going to do it. But I didn't know how it was going to be. And then I had some dreams. I had dreams where it was sewn together, and where it was glued together, and it was made out of leather, and glass was all running up and down, and needles were running through all of the things, and it was all tangled up, and there were mousetraps in it. Just awful dreams. I was having all these nightmares about

it. Didn't have anything to do with it whatsoever.

SMITH: Those kind of sound like your assemblages from the early sixties.

WAGNER: No, they weren't even that. These things were much more messed up than that, no. These were disorganized piles of nothingness and globs of gloop. It was like they were being dragged up from the underworld, what was coming in the dream. But I knew that Teresa of Avila was a Spanish woman, and she was a fiery Spanish woman, and she lived in the medieval time, right?

SMITH: Well, renaissance.

WAGNER: Well, 1500. Fifteen hundred had pretty medieval architecture, they always say.

SMITH: Yeah, well, the transition from the middle ages to the renaissance.

WAGNER: She died in 1582; she died at sixty-eight years old. She was my age exactly, except for a month. She was born March 28, an Aries, and I was born April 13, so she was a month older than I am now. But she was still an Aries, three weeks older. She is only four hundred years older than I am. [laughter] So I thought about this castle as being something that should be related to that kind of architecture, you know. Oh, I had priests that were telling me it looked like a chambered nautilus. I had other ones saying it looked like a ball of mirrors. I had

all sorts of suggestions about how it looked. None of them were what I saw or what I wanted it to be. So I just kept looking, kept feeling, kept writing and kept reading. Well, from 1979, when I started actually--late '79, the end of '79, the end of December, up to about the middle of '81 or around in there, early '81, I was still reading. I read the book, I think, seven times. A lot. I knew what I wanted to put in the castle, but I had no conception what it looked like. So I had to go to mass one morning, and I asked Saint Joseph--after all, he's a carpenter--and I said, "Saint Joseph," I said, "you know that I'm an artist and I like to work and build things. If you want me to prove it, I can bring my saw and my tools, I will show you that I am serious about these things. I would appreciate it if you would actually help me and show me what this interior castle might look--" I never got the word "like" out of my mouth, because there it was; it was in front of me; I was looking at it. He showed me every detail of that castle, and the vision stayed with me for five minutes so I could study it. So I raced home immediately and I drew it out, made a drawing of it, pen and ink, best I could. I took it to San Francisco, because I was having an opening the next day after the vision in Pacific Grove Art Center, so I had to go. I took it to San Francisco, to the Carmelites, and I showed them what I had. They really

loved it, blessed it, and thought it was going to be just what it was supposed to be. They could visualize it, too, when they saw what I'd visualized. I talked about the seven levels from seven mansions, what was going to be sort of in it and summarized up the thing. They were very, very pleased with what was coming. Then I came back, and I couldn't hardly wait to get back, because I started making drawings. I worked for the hottest-- I think it was the hottest summer we'd had here in Pasadena, in 1981. It was 110 degrees all the time, and I was sweating constantly. I made all the drawings for the whole castle in two days, scale drawings, working drawings, exactly what it looked like. While I was working on it, there was a couple that came over that are doctors here in Pasadena, and I said, "This is going to be a great thing to do, but I'm broke. I don't know how I'm going to get it together, the money." Two days later they mailed a check to me, and it was enough to get me started.

SMITH: Who was this?

WAGNER: Gordon and Sharon Vigario, who lived down on Oak Knoll [Avenue] across from the Huntington Hotel there. They gave me the first money so that I could get going on it.

SMITH: Were they Catholics or artist patrons?

WAGNER: No, doctors. She works for Caltech [California

Institute of Technology] for some laboratory there. She's a research lab person. Anyway, so they gave me money. They were both Catholics. And then Father Joseph Glynn, who's a Carmelite here in Saint Teresa Church in Alhambra, he shows up and he hands me a check for $200. "Well, Gordon, I think you can get going on this now." Because he wanted to see this built. I showed him the concept. "Good," he said. "We keep together."

So everytime he'd come over, if I'd just put in two pieces, he would bless it. "It's coming. Incredible." He himself is like a leprechaun. He'd bless it everytime. Forty-eight priests and two archbishops, Cardinal [Timothy] Manning and the Archbishop [John R.] Quinn, from San Francisco, they blessed it. All of these guys blessed this castle, so it has a lot of blessings on it. Everytime it went anyplace.

TAPE NUMBER: XIII, SIDE ONE

MARCH 21, 1987

SMITH: I want to pick up where we left off last time, which was **The Interior Castle** [also known as The Castle of **the Seven Dwelling Places**]. Where we had left discussing, you had seen **The Interior Castle** as a vision when you were at church. Now, this was not a dream; you distinguish this from a dream. Why is that?

WAGNER: It wasn't a dream. I wasn't asleep in the church, I was very much awake. It was at the mass, during the mass--I don't fall asleep during the mass--and I made a personal intention at that moment, you're allowed to do that, when the priest asks people to make personal intentions. I thought about it. I actually asked Saint Joseph, who was a carpenter and sort of the patron saint of workmen and laborers, a very patient man, I asked him if he could help me, to show me what it might look like after all these various and sundry preconceptions by just about everybody. I didn't get the last word out of my mouth when he showed me the whole vision right in front of my eyes. There it was, all I had to do was draw it out. I could remember it in detail. Right now I can remember all the detail, it was such a strong vision. It came like a light.

SMITH: Had you had other visions before that you used in your artistic work?

WAGNER: Not very many in my life, no. Not really. Some, but nothing that I was really conjuring up, that I asked for like that.

SMITH: So then you drew out the plan for The Interior Castle. Let's discuss **The Interior Castle** and its various levels, how you chose to represent each of the levels.

WAGNER: Well, actually, what I did was I actually manifested Saint Teresa of Avila's interior castle, the book she wrote, one of the great books, called El Libro de **Siete Moradas** in Spanish, which was her greatest piece of work, a scholarly piece known all over the world by all academics. So manifesting it into all this-- Because after all, the interior castle, who is it? It is every single person in the world; we're all the interior castle. It's how far we progress within ourselves in prayer and get closer to God, into the light. So it had seven mansions, or seven levels, of progress, the seven **moradas**, or seven rooms. The first, outside of the castle, was a moat. She always talked about it as filled with snakes and vermin and stench from foul sulfur odors and gasses. Creatures devouring-- Things that come out of the mud and pull a soul under so it has no progress in the world, it doesn't have time for progress or prayer. Now, those snakes and all those vermin and all those animals and creatures, if you actually get down to it, they're anxiety, they're hate,

they're lust, they're jealousy, they're greed, they're viciousness. They're all of the things that keep you from progressing, from even getting inside of the castle because-- The first door there is very open to anyone who wants to go through the door into the castle itself.

The first level is dark, very little light, so you're just crippling your way through the door. There are two toads that guard the door, as she says, that try to keep you from entering. When you actually get inside of the castle, it's so dark, and it's red and yellow and orange, the color. It is the Desert of Aridity, as she calls it. There's a hole in that desert with a well, and the well is so deep that you have to take a arduous descent down into the bottom of this well to get a drop of water. Water doesn't flow there; that's the holy water, the spirit. Actually, what you're doing in there, you're being sidetracked. Because in this room there are approximately, oh, maybe several hundred rooms that spread out around the first room, almost an infinity of rooms that will distract you and take you off on all of these different tangents out of the castle through the rooms rather than to rise upward. So you're always-- A lateral thing is happening. At the same time, you're not really seeing anything of the beauty of the castle because you're so busy still working and hating and doing these things that you haven't really

gotten into it yet, what it's about.

So if one has enough persistence, one can make it to the second level. But the second level is not much better than the first level, because all these people are in an illusion that they're gaining and making progress. There's all sorts of things in there that can bother you. The serpents are still there, and you get carried away with raptures, circumlocutions, and all of these things that are very damaging. You can lose yourself right there. You can also look down through that level to where you were wanting to say, "I don't want to be in this level, I want to go back down to where I came from. I know those people, but I'm not sure I know these people up here, and I don't know myself here. I better join them where I'm comfortable." That level has a windlass to draw the water up, much easier at this moment. That's where the devil sits with a file, as she says. He works with a noiseless file to cut down the pillar of charity. If he can catch you in this second room, he'll dance around hell 68,000 times holding his tail, for one soul, to take him back down to the bottom and outside in the moat again.

The third level is when you go upward out of the sky above you, which is nothing but a mirror of where you are and where you've been. So getting through the third level is a very tough one. Once you get through there, then

you've passed the real dangerous point, the danger point of being taken back down again. But the third level is the biggest room in the castle. It's filled with people, and it's a very comfortable place to be. It has gardens and a viaduct that carries the water with people who clean the viaduct. But actually, it's a very horrible place to be, too, because it is not where you want to be. It's not what Teresa's teaching, she's teaching contemplative prayer. So these people that are in this big room are, for the most part, most of the Catholic church. It's comfortable, they do the right things, the proper order of dress, they do all these things. But they are quite critical at times of others, and this is-- They get jarred up; if some emotional thing happens to them, they come apart. But all in all, they're all good people, and they all love the Lord, but they haven't found out how to really get to him yet, because only in the third room does the light start to come through.

So there's this big cloud in the top of the third room called the Cloud of Unknowing. If a person does not go through the Cloud of Unknowing, they will stay in the third room forever; they'll never get out of that room. There are still serpents in that room, not many, but a few; they can bite you. But the water runs free through the viaduct, and there's flowers and gardens and everything is quite

beautiful. Romantic and charming. But that isn't it, the Lord is looking for more than that. You have to go through the Cloud of Unknowing into the Cloud of Forgetting until you reach the other side in the fourth room, where it is the death of the old man and the birth of the new. She compares the actual soul to the cocoon and the chrysalis.

I have used all these symbols all the way through this piece, like making my own monsters at the bottom, my own snakes, my own creatures, giving them funny names, and slime and mud, and the next room being that muddy room inside with the little people all working and struggling, not paying attention. In the next room I have the devil sawing down the pillar of charity, and I have all of these symbols that she was writing about in her book. Then I have the third room with all the people very comfortable, hundreds of people in gardens and paths. Nobody's off the paths, nobody is making any waves, everything is just in order. It's an ordered garden. So I reach that fourth room, and I've got the cocoon in a garden that has nothing. It's just beautiful, with colors that change as you look through the windows, and then you go around and you see the chrysalis on another bush.

And then the water has two fonts: One font doesn't do anything, it just stands there with water in it; the other font is filling all the time. That's the soul. The more

the soul takes in, the more the water expands, and the more that comes into him. This is just water, again, she's talking about. Teresa was a water lover. It's like the mother and the child. The child cannot grow if it is not nursed by the mother; it has to have the mother's milk. So the mother is in there nursing a child in this light.

This room is quiet and still, because she says we talk too much to the Lord, and we don't listen. Silence is the most important thing; stop talking and listen to what he tells you. Don't ask him all the time, let him tell you what he's telling you. If you ask him something, he will tell you, but don't keep asking so he can't have a chance. This is contemplative prayer. And this is where she was. She was an advanced woman of her time, four hundred years ago. Quite a radical among the church. A lot of them thought she was crazy and a flibbertigibbet and a gadabout and all these things. She was a powerful woman who had this concept that was given to her by the Lord. She wrote it all in six weeks, the whole interior castle, which is a masterpiece.

Well, then we move up to the fifth room, which has the butterfly. The soul is a white butterfly so enamored by the love that he has been given--or she, you never call the soul he, it's always a she--that she has been given, that she's just suspended in space in this garden where the two

rivers meet at a lake, very good water. Also in that room is the devil, who comes as the angel of light. Because at this moment, the soul is so vulnerable as to either rise up to the light of the Lord or to be taken back down into the bottom outside into the pit. This is the last chance the devil has of catching that character, that soul, before it goes to the next level, which is the sixth level, where Teresa spent so much of her time.

I have the symbols there of all of the persecutors around the building. I have the soul, the butterfly again, still emerging. I have Teresa, herself, an image of her in the transverberation, where she received the arrow in her heart by the Lord, the flaming arrow, like the Bellini sculpture, the same idea, you know, great sculpture of Bellini. That plus the ocean. She said a great floodgate opened one time to her in a vision, and all the water ran in so big that the soul felt like a tiny ship balanced on the top of the wave. So I have the tiny ship balanced on top of the waves. I have the Holy Spirit coming down in that room.

SMITH: How did you choose to represent the Holy Spirit?

WAGNER: With the dove. I have the Son, Jesus, there because the Son-- She says, "Good Jesus will take me to the Father, so let him do it." So I have the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit there--I have the Son and the Holy

Spirit, and the Father is in the next level up. That's where the light is, where the tabernacle is for the blessed sacrament, in the tower. There's a light up there, and that light rains right down through the center of the whole castle through the top four levels. The closer you get to the Lord, the brighter the light. And that's the Trinity. That is in the center because everyone has the Trinity within them; down through the center of them there's the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit within them internally.

Between the sixth and the seventh mansion I have two candles, the white candle and the gold candle. This is the betrothal between the soul and the Lord. They're entwined, and they can come apart and they're lighted, or they can come together and they're lighted. This is a symbol of the betrothal between the soul and the Lord. Under the monstrance in the top of the tower where the blessed sacrament is, I have the butterfly. The soul has died, given up. The marriage between the soul and the Lord has been consummated in that seventh mansion, so it's not necessary for-- It gives up and becomes with the Lord, married to the Lord. As far as the outer configuration of the castle, it had fourteen sides, which was a double seven, because of the seven mansions. I had seven with seven spindles and seven flying buttresses of gold sending

down the energies down through the spirals into the moat to try and create energy to take the people into the castle. Because a pure man, one of the scroungiest bums crawling in the street, you would think the last person that could even get up and do anything-- The Lord has a whistle. It's like a whistle for dogs, you know, when you can't hear it, and he can whistle, and that poor man can go straight from the bottom of the moat right to the Lord's room that quick. And he can be sent back down just that quick. It's within the person.

SMITH: In terms of the visual manifestation, was each level-- Like the ocean and the flood, that's one image within that level, the fifth level, right?

WAGNER: All levels have water except the top.

SMITH: Right. What I'm getting at is, how were you-- The ocean, flooding the room is such a universal kind of image, it overpowers the other images. There's a temporal aspect to what she's writing about. How do you combine these different images into a thing that you see all at once?

WAGNER: You mean physically?

SMITH: Yeah, physically.

WAGNER: I have it right there in the piece. I have this Holy Spirit, of course, flying, and the butterflies flying. Jesus is standing on the water. Teresa is on the water because she could levitate, she could be anyplace.

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: And the ship, the tiny ship, is balanced between two points of a big wave. The amount of water was given: it started small, as a drop down in the well, and the more you progressed, the more the water comes to you and flows. That's the Holy Spirit, and that's the holy water. It is a symbol of taking in. Like some people accept the Catholic church or any church or any religion in a thimble. Others accept it in a cup, others in a barrel, and others in a water tank, and others, the whole ocean; it's limitless. So the ocean is sort of limitless. What she actually used in her book for the last water that I substituted there because I couldn't make it work was rain, downpours of rain from the heavens. But I used light, which is still the light of the Holy Spirit.

SMITH: Connected with this on the upper levels, the sixth and seventh levels in particular, where you're dealing with an intense spiritual experience, wasn't it difficult to visualize something that is maybe inherently not visual, that's very interior?

WAGNER: Well, I'll tell you right now, the seventh level wasn't bad; I could get that one. But on the fifth and the sixth ones I was lost for a while. But I had plenty of time, because after all, I was so familiar with the moat and the first level and the second level that I could work

on that for three or four months enjoying all the demons and monsters before I ever had to worry about getting to that level. By the time I'd been through that much, I didn't worry about anything on this castle. Teresa was working with me all the time. I would want to go to the beach, and I'd feel this tugging, "No, you're not going to the beach, you're going to work." I devoted every day of the year to building that piece. I could never get away, even for-- Well, if I wanted to get something for the castle it was all right. The lens I had to get, a round lens with a convex lens to fit into the monstrance for the Host. I didn't know where I was going to pick that up. I went to a jewelry store down on Lake [Avenue] and Del Mar [Boulevard] on the corner. I said, "I've built this monstrance myself." I said, "Do you have a lens that would fit into this piece?"

"I'll see." So he took his calipers and measured it off. He went back and he pushed it in, click, and that was it.

I said, "Will it ever come out?"

He said, "Never. It will always be there".

I said, "What do I owe you?"

"Owe me? Do you think I'm crazy? I wouldn't take money for anything like this. This is something that is a very special piece of art, beautiful piece. How could I

ask money for such a wonderful thing as this?" He was an Armenian. That was the end of that.

I needed a tube one time to carry light from the seventh mansion down to the third mansion. It came down through the center. It needed the edges polished so it would transmit the light with intensity to the bottom. It was a plastic tube three inches in diameter. I called up this company down here on Foothill [Boulevard] and told them what I had and that I needed it polished up to transmit--

"Oh, we burnish those things. You come on down, we'll take care of it for you."

"What's the charge?"

"It'll be about fifteen dollars for the job."

I said okay. I went down on a Monday morning and I didn't have my checkbook with me. Oh, I did have a checkbook, that's right, I didn't have any cash. They took it in; they came back. "I didn't bring my money, can I cash a check?"

"What for?"

"To pay for this thing."

"Oh no, don't bother. It's free. Take it."

Endless things like that happened during this whole project. When I needed something, I was always guided to it immediately. Somehow I was taken there. Places I'd

never been before, I found myself wandering around in finding exactly what I wanted for this project. Completely guided to it. I didn't have to-- Everything fell into place. The only thing I had a difficult time with were the twist-turnings that came up the outside. I remember I wanted to get these things, and they don't make them anymore, you know, the spiral twists. They were very difficult to find. I happened to be in the Pasadena farmer's market, and I saw a friend of mine I hadn't seen in twenty-five years. The last time I saw him, he had tried to commit suicide. He crawled down the mountain on Topanga Canyon to the highway and flagged a ride to the hospital with a bullet hole through him. Well, anyway, I hadn't seen him in all these years, and he was there. He lives in La Cañada[-Flintridge]. "Howard," I said.

"Well, Gordon, where you been?" He said, "You still making art?"

I said, "Oh, sure." I said, "Well, what are you doing, Howard?"

"Oh, I'm making furniture and refinishing it."

"Oh, wonderful, you're just the man I'm looking for. Where can I get some of the twist-turned spindles?"

He says, "Well, they don't make them anymore, but I'll look it up and see what I can find." Two days later he says, "There's a man out in the San Fernando Valley, in

Sherman Oaks, who has all of that sort of thing. He's a private company; you can't just walk in and buy it from him, you have to have a reason. For goodness sake, Gordon, don't tell him you're an artist or he'll throw you out the front door. Tell him anything but that. Tell him you're a designer, or furniture designer, a decorator, and you're trying to get these. You want to make maybe a hundred of these things or a thousand of them, and you need the material for that. Don't ever mention that you're an artist."

So I got out there, I made an appointment and I came out. I found exactly what I was looking for in the catalog, just right, you know, three-quarters of an inch in diameter.

He said, "How much do you need of this?"

I said, "Well, I need about twenty-one feet."

He said, "Well, they don't come in twenty-one foot lengths. I don't think you can get it that way. They come in ten-foot lengths, so you'd have to get about forty feet, work it out for ten-foot lengths. You'd have to buy extra."

So I said, "All right, whatever you say."

"What kind of business did you say you were in?"

I said, "Liturgical art."

"What the hell is that?" he says. "That got something

to do with the church?"

I said, "Yeah, I guess so; you might call it that."

"I'm going to tell you something, son," he calls me--I'm thirty years older than he is--"if you ever come in here again and buy anything from me, I'm going to throw you out the door. I've already written this out, so I have to do it, but don't ever come back."

I said thank you and left. It took two months to receive this from Grand Rapids, Michigan. When the bill came, it was $112 for the spindles alone, but I did get them.

There was a man in Topanga, he wanted to make them for me, thirty inches long for $80 apiece. So, you see, I did make out a little better. He was going to carve them for me, because they're so hard to get. So anyway, we got that. All those things were helping.

Getting through the fifth and sixth rooms, what am I going to do? I'm blocked here now; I'm getting up there. I can get through all this bottom, all this debris, all these monsters, all these people and all these straight people with their fountains and their pretty gardens, but what do I do when I get to this part? That's what the people say, "What do I do when I reach the third room? How do I break through the Cloud of Unknowing?" That's what I had to learn. I learned something about contemplative

prayer by actually reading about what Teresa's talking about. I knew enough about meditation from my early years in Buddhism and yoga and Taoism, so it came naturally for me to be able to to this and to quiet my mind and to stop thinking, as she said; think less and love more, that's the way she put it. Instead of going out there and oohing and aahing and rapturing and going on, give charity to somebody; help some poor person. That is the best meditation in the world, helping somebody, charity. So I just let myself go; I didn't worry about those rooms. I needed all these flowers and plants and things like that. I found that one of the greatest places for that sort of thing is right here in our hometown. Old Stat's down there, where I could get artificial branches and the feeling of the gardens and things to put into it, miniature.

SMITH: Are there any found objects? Did you use any found objects in **The Interior Castle**?

WAGNER: No, not found in the sense of found; I bought objects. Like all of the souls, all of the little people, which were-- Two hundred and fifty of them are in **The Interior Castle**. I bought them all in one big bag of people down at the Whistle Stop. They were for railroad stations and trains. They're all the color white, and I kept them that way because I wanted them to be white souls,

souls all white like the lambs, the lambs or the sheep of the flock. I made a lot of my own objects for it. I made all the monsters, made that sort of thing.

SMITH: What about the representation of the devil?

WAGNER: I made the devil.

SMITH: How did you arrive at the imagery for the devil?

WAGNER: Well, it was easy, because I knew a lot about him. I just made a devil. It was a beautiful devil with the long wings and sitting on his tail in this room of mirrors where it goes on to infinity. He comes and goes with a file in his hand to file down that pillar of charity that the interior castle was built on, faith, hope and charity, golden columns like caissons on a building. He's filing down that one. It was easy to make the devil, one of the--So simple. Then Virginia, my wife, she made the angel. She made little figures of Saint Teresa of Avila, and she made them all: the first one, where she's praying; the second level, where she's defying the devil with the cross; the third room, she says, "Hey, you guys, there's more," and then she's got the book, "go up to the fourth mansion"; she's telling them there's more. There's nobody in the fourth room, just a butterfly--I mean, just the cocoon and the chrysalis and the mother and child, but not Teresa. In the fifth room, the angel of light is there--Virginia made the angel of light--and Teresa's also there helping a

child. In the sixth room, she's in transverberation, that's all.

SMITH: The use of the toy figures gives a kind of childlike quality to the piece, not childish but childlike. Was that something that you were aiming for? Was that a goal, the simplicity?

WAGNER: Well, they're not really childlike, the ones I got. They're not cute, they're actually real people, like these kind of people. They look like people, they don't look like funny creatures or animals, but actual, real people. They're similar to the kind of people I've used in **Firaskew**, not funny ones. No, they're very beautiful little German figures. Authenticity. If you want to get into the childlike quality, heavens, Teresa of Avila was probably one of the most childlike people you would ever meet, as a power. After all, "the Lord says, 'Think like a child." That's one of his major expressions, think as a child, accept things as a child. But childlike, I don't think I tried to do anything cute in this castle, nothing. I wasn't interested in that. I wasn't interested at all in injecting any of my own self into it at all. I was completely detached from the whole creation. It was just a matter of Saint Joseph's vision, her writing, and the best way I could relate to that was through the images that I could write down and build and put together within

that symbolism to make it work as a whole. That is the way that it came out. I wasn't trying to do anything that wasn't-- Nothing was added to it.

SMITH: Did you study some of the earlier religious artists, like Giotto or Simone Martini, or those medieval paintings, early renaissance paintings with multiple stories within them?

WAGNER: Well, I used to enjoy looking at them in Europe, the Italians and the Flemish especially, like [Hans] Memling and [Roger] van der Weyden and [Lucas] van Leyden and [Hubert and Jan] van Eyck and the great Flemish painter [Robert] Campin. I just looked at them and enjoyed the surrealism that they had within them. Most of them were quite surreal, the Flemish especially, in their early religious paintings. A tremendous amount of surrealism in them. I used to walk into churches, and I always enjoyed the old church art of the medieval period, and that sort of relationship, and renaissance. I liked all the periods of that art, but I wasn't trying to make that art. Even in this piece, I wasn't trying to make that kind of art. It was a matter of it just formed itself from the way I was given the vision. I knew it was right, because I wanted to relate not as a ball of mirrors, not as-- Well, anyway. I didn't want to relate it to any of the images that had been given to me by other people that I didn't feel really knew

what Teresa was all about. I really felt that I had to do this, because she was a sixteenth-century Spanish woman living in a medieval city, and I wanted it to feel like it was walled and strong and beautiful and elegant and of that kind of architecture. When Joseph showed it to me that way, I was so happy with the way it was going to be.

SMITH: Where has the castle been exhibited?

WAGNER: Well, it's been to about every monastery of the Carmelites in California. After all, Saint Teresa of Avila was a Carmelite. In 1982 it was shown-- It had its first showing at Saint Teresa of Avila Monastery down here in Alhambra on Alhambra Road. It's a cloister. They had it for two weeks within the cloister and I talked to all of the cloistered nuns. There I talked to them behind the-- just talked to them through the closure, through the grill. We took it from there to San Francisco, took it to [the Monastery of] Cristo Rey in San Francisco, the Carmelite monastery. I was allowed to go into the monastery there with the sisters of the cloister. Nobody gets in, but they said, "Gordon, you're a workman, like an electrician or a plumber." So they let me come in. I sat down with all the sisters in a circle, and we talked about the castle. I left it there for about three weeks. The archbishop was there, he saw it. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, she saw it. Everybody saw it. Then I took it

over to the Pope Pius XII Room under the Saint Ignatius de Loyola Church at USF [University of San Francisco] and showed it to about 150 people, mostly poets and artists and writers of North Beach, a lot of beat guys and a lot of people I'd known in San Francisco, and three priests and about six ladies that were just there, and a lot of psychologists, and [Lawrence] Fixel and all that group of people came. It was a wonderful evening.

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WAGNER: Mount Carmel in Oakville, that's a monastery for men, Carmelite. It's a wonderful place up on a mountain right by Oakville. If you know where Oakville is, it's north of Napa, the wine country. It was there for about a week, and then we took it down to the Carmelite cloister of Marinwood, north of San Rafael. I gave three or four talks there. I gave talks in all these places. Then we brought it from there, from San Rafael, we took it down to Santa Clara to the cloister there, which is one of the big ones. These are all Carmelites. From that point we took it down to Monterey, out where the Monastery Beach is, that cloister where my friend Barry Masteller, and I were talking to these ladies, and they wanted to have it for about two weeks. So I said, "Where do you want it?"

They said, "Come on."

So Barry and I were carrying it through the cloister, back through all these sisters. So I've been in quite a few cloisters that not even priests can get into. In fact, I was in the one there where the priest thanked me for helping him or he would never have gotten into the place. Virginia couldn't go in, no laity are allowed. So it was an experience. Then we've had it all around here. We've had it at Sacred Heart retreat house. We talked in all the

parishes. Saint Philip's, we had it right in the church there with three hundred people. We've had it just about everyplace. Now it's been in Duarte, at the Santa Teresita Carmelite Hospital for the last ten months. Next month we're going to take it out of there and we're giving a talk on April 26 at the Saint Ignatius Loyola Church in Highland Park at six in the evening. From there I don't know what will happen to it. Virginia wrote the book about it, and she did a very good job of putting the book together. It's called **The Castle of the Seven Dwelling Places**. Everytime we take it someplace, we sell more books. That's the way we kind of get paid for our time. But the Carmelites paid us; they would give us a couple hundred dollars to bring it, and they'd buy the books, and they'd get people to buy the books.

The best story of all that I can remember was in San Francisco at Saint Ignatius Loyola. There was a priest there from the Richmond District, the Saint Monica Church on Geary [Boulevard], Monsignor Daniel Cahill. He got up after the whole thing was over and told all my friends, he said, "You know, I'd like to tell all you people, if I could get something across to my people in my parish like Gordon does to you, I'd be the happiest man in the world. I love this man," and he threw his arms around me. He is the father confessor and celebrates the mass for Mother

Teresa of Calcutta's nuns on Church Street in San Francisco, and he's telling me this. A man with that much humility belongs in the seventh room.

When we got back from Oakville, he said, "Gordon, I've got a surprise for you."

I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, you come on over."

We came over and he hands me a check for a thousand dollars. He'd made it out himself. He said, "It's not from me, but it's from an anonymous person who heard your talk at Saint Ignatius Loyola and thought that you would like to have this to carry on with your work." A thousand bucks, just handed it to us like that.

Those kinds of things were always happening to us while we were traveling around with it. We spent about almost six months traveling with it.

SMITH: I asked you earlier if you were a religious artist, and you said no. But surely-- Well, The Interior Castle is a work of religious art, right?

WAGNER: Yeah, definitely. Well, I never would classify myself as a religious artist, but everybody else thought I did religious things, you know, in my own symbols and images in my assemblage work, you know, objects and things. But I never really classified myself as anything in the religious art.

SMITH: Have you done anything else besides The Interior Castle that is explicitly devotional?

WAGNER: Early works, yeah, I think so. I did that one on the crucifix with the spikes all around it; the Santo, I call it. Some other little boxes and niches and things, special things that I've given to Virginia as a present, like the Niño de Prague and one to Saint Christopher. Some of those things. But it's not great art; I'm no master in art.

SMITH: The image of the ascent, that is something that appears in other works of yours, the symbol of the ascent.

WAGNER: The ascent, yeah. Well, I think I've always had a tendency to have things going upward. Very much of my work has been that way in the past. Centering, the centering, going up into the light. I think that all started way back with the American Indian, going up, uplift from the center from the earth up into the light. And through the meditation, through the kundalini and through the Taoist, through all of the different meditations, that's the centering that goes up through the spine, right? Actually, if you took The Interior Castle and put it into seven different levels, you have the seven different chakras of the body, right? You have the chakras. They're the same vibrations and energies to get to the light. So you could use the castle as the human form, which we are using,

because it's every person. It's the development stages, every chakra, or his prayer, or whatnot to get to the illumination, or God, within them or the God within the Christian world. It's all part of the same. There's a parallel.

SMITH: **The Interior Castle** is the symbol of rebirth of the soul, and you mentioned earlier that the period after you went to Europe was a period of struggle and rebirth for you. Was that struggle projected into **The Interior Castle**?

WAGNER: I think I'd already been through that rebirth. You know, we can die several times in our lives and be reborn again. Fortunately, if we are artists, we have that privilege because that's the only way we keep going, or we would die of boredom. These little rebirths that get you going again for another five years are so nice to have, otherwise you are just sitting in a stale situation with the same thing all the time. It's nice to turn yourself around and shake yourself all up and get rid of all the old habits and patterns and start out with some other idea.

SMITH: There's another thing I wanted to ask you about, which is, you mentioned that Teresa says, "Let the Lord tell you."

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: And contemplative prayer. How does contemplative prayer relate to dreams? Is there a relationship? Does

the the Lord tell you things through your dreams?

WAGNER: Not really, no. Although I'm sure that the Lord is in your dreams, definitely. If you have a mind and a heart and a body, purified and clean from all of the contamination of the everyday world, and you're thinking about the Lord, I think there's a possibility that He can come to you in your dreams as well as at any minute. Because when I start to work, the first thing I say is, "Holy Spirit, come to me. Help me today. I don't know what's going to happen, but let's have fun together." That's the way I talk to him. We'll see what's going to come. Sometimes nothing comes, and then all of a sudden while I'm walking someplace, he lets me have it, there it is.

SMITH: I guess what I'm probing for is the relationship of surrealism to your conception of the religious state and divine communication. Is there a relationship?

WAGNER: Between surrealism--

SMITH: Between surrealism and religion.

WAGNER: Well, in one way there is, yeah, there is a relationship. I think that the Gospel and especially the Old Testament we use is probably one of the most surreal stories-- No surrealist ever wrote any stories like that. Pretty far out.

SMITH: You mean like Joshua stopping the sun?

WAGNER: Oh, everything like that, rivers and the Red Sea opening up, constant. Blowing with mud and He created a man. All these things are very, very, very surreal. They're not real to the average, logical mind, or rational mind, right? Anymore than they can accept God in the tabernacle of the church as a living person with real eyes and everything. The Catholic church only does that, no other church does that. He's there, He's not a symbol of there; He is there. Well, it's pretty hard for a lot of rational people to get through this. Even priests have a difficult time with it, so don't-- But that's surreal because it's irrational, and when something is irrational it's surreal, you know. You either believe it or you don't believe it. You have faith or you don't have faith. Or a blind faith or a real faith. It's all stages of whether you can accept it. Some days you can accept it, the next day you can't. It doesn't matter. You grow, and the Lord will test you. He will do all sorts of things to block you, to get in your way, to tie you up, to give you some humility and love, love of others. So if you're going into the basic surrealist-- Every single surrealist of those early days, it's funny, but as much as they were protesting it, they were all Catholic, and they all died Catholics, and they were all buried as Catholics although they rebelled within it, which is a natural thing to do. We

naturally rebel. There is no one-- That's the thing I like about the Catholic church, there is nobody in the Catholic church that is pure, there is nobody that is not a sinner. That's what I've had to go through with my director, my spiritual director. He told me you can't run a church without sinners anymore than you can run a hospital without sick people. These other churches, some of them have the idea that they don't sin. They don't worry about confession; they don't do anything like this because they don't sin, they're perfectly fine people, you see. So we accept all those things: we accept sin, and we accept love and we-- When you have that, no matter how strong the person might be, like [André] Breton and [Erik] Satie and [Yves] Tanguy and everybody else, when they died, they all took extreme unction, they were all buried and had the last rites. Although they talked against the church, they went through it. They bought it because it was such a powerful thing within their own minds and their psychological workings. Then the conflict between this art that was trying to put it down and everything else, their own insides were torn up by it. And the ambivalence of this thing-- So that made them very strong, because they had faith, actually a blind faith underneath. They weren't going very far, but they still had a faith to do what they had to do. That gave them courage to do it, to be

surrealists, where if they hadn't had both of those things, they would have stopped, you see. So I think in a movement like that you have to have a lot of guts and a lot of faith, because when everybody is against you-- Just like the Catholic church, you've got to have a lot of guts, a lot of faith to belong to the Catholic church, because everybody hates you. That's the way life is. That's what Christ says, "Everybody is going to hate you and hate me." That's what He's taught, and we're used to it. We know that's the way it is. So you don't go around hitting your brother, you go around loving your brother. When he smashes you in the head, you just smile and say, "That's all right, thank you." That takes guts. And that's where surrealism was.

SMITH: After you finished **The Interior Castle**, what did you move onto then? Were you doing any other works while you were working on **The Interior Castle**?

WAGNER: No, nothing. For that whole year, I was just right on it. No, I had finished the acrylics and the boxes for my playing card series, so being interested in building castles, I built the playing card castle, **The Suit of Pluses.** That took a year to build after The Interior Castle.

SMITH: That's a big constructed piece as well, an assemblage, a constructed assemblage?

WAGNER: It's a castle. It has a similar feeling to **Firaskew** and **The Interior Castle**, only it's a card castle all by itself. It stands about forty-eight inches high and eighteen inches square. It's all full of illusions and mirrors and rooms, and it takes in the whole suit of pluses.

SMITH: With that you completed your playing card series?

WAGNER: That completed my playing card series, and I've never shown it. It's called "The Fool," that's the title of the exhibition if it ever comes about, "The Joker."

SMITH: Of all four suits?

WAGNER: Right. I've proposed it to a couple of places, and they're interested, but they never get together, you never hear from them. I'm sure it will happen one day in the near future, maybe in a year or two.

SMITH: Then what did you work on?

WAGNER: What year would we be talking about?

SMITH: 'Eighty-three, I think.

WAGNER: 'Eighty-three.

SMITH: You certainly-- A lot of your pun boxes were done--

WAGNER: Well, they were before.

SMITH: Well, **Draw Up a Chair** is '83.

WAGNER: No, these little ones here, the black and whites, they were before the castle. **Draw Up a Chair** and some of those things came after **The Interior Castle**. I was working

on those also during my playing card castle. These little ones, **Arcane** and this one. And this **Draw Up a Chair** was actually built at the same time as the first room over on the corner, that building, in **Firaskew**. Because in the bottom room of that building is a "Draw Up a Chair," and that's a spin-off from this box. So the two related at that moment. I built those in San Pedro, in Tony Portillo's house and studio in '83, the summer, when I was staying down there for the summer.

SMITH: When did you do the Marine series?

WAGNER: I've been working on the Marine series, I guess, for years. Whenever a good one comes up I keep adding to them. I'd like to really have a show sometime, the whole set of them. Probably, I started the first of the Marine series in 1975 with **The Prairie Schooner** sinking on the prairie, on the desert. A sixteen-mast schooner.

SMITH: And then there's **The Room**.

WAGNER: **The Room** is more recent, that was 1985. It's falling off [the picture frame]. I've done quite a few since that time.

SMITH: Is that symbolist art?

WAGNER: The symbolists? I don't think so, do you? I wouldn't call it symbolism. I think it's more surreal than symbolist, because the juxtaposition-- The room with its ship falling out of the painting that's tipped on its side

and letting the water run out of it is not exactly symbolist. Do you think so?

SMITH: Well, it can be read from a symbolistic viewpoint.

WAGNER: Yeah, but it has no underlying meaning, though, except that I've been into people's houses in my life with rooms like that, with cards thrown down and beer cans and whatnot and things on the floor, trophies.

SMITH: The ship doesn't have a specific symbolic meaning for you, then?

WAGNER: I don't think it does. It probably does in all of them, basically, because I love ships. There's something about them. I'm always putting them into strange juxtapositions where they don't belong or doing things that they wouldn't have to normally be doing. I've always been a lover of ships. I'm a shipwatcher, a professional shipwatcher. I could watch them for years; I never get tired of going to the harbor and sitting down by the water and just watching them go by. It's a very contemplative thing.

SMITH: In Christian art, the ship is one of the symbols for the soul.

WAGNER: That's right, hangs in the church, a bark or sometimes a full-size ship.

SMITH: But in your case, in these works, you're not--

WAGNER: I never thought of them from that aspect until I

got into Christianity, being a fallen-away pagan, you know, six years or something. I'd seen them in churches, but I never connected them to anything. I thought they just didn't know what to do with them, so they hung them up on the ceiling. [laughter] Some of them in Sweden are incredible, whole galleons and barks and hanging down from the church, the beams, on chains. Incredible.

SMITH: Let's move on to another subject, which is your getting involved with Angel's Gate Cultural Center. When did you start working with Angel's Gate?

WAGNER: Nineteen eighty-two.

SMITH: Had it already been formed, organized?

WAGNER: I was one of the first artists invited to submit some sort of a proposal to be there, to have a space to teach, only. That was through Honor Kirk, who was the director at the time, who's now the director of the Aquarius Gallery in Cambria Pines--Cambria, I guess they call it. She phoned me up and asked me if I would be interested in this. Another friend of mine I'd known a long time, Nick Kappes, who is a photographer, he told me about it a year before it happened. He said, "We're going to try and do something like they did in Fort Mason with the old military barracks and kind of develop it from that aspect." Fort Mason in San Francisco.

So I said, "Well, it sounds interesting."

"Well," he said, "just make out a proposal, whatever it is you would like to do." Just teaching at that time.

So I made out a proposal to teach senior citizens. I always thought that the senior citizens should have more of a chance than they do to express themselves, in more ways than just piddling around with cutting out flowers and making crafts and being passed off as old people without any imagination, just dumped in a little class to make pretty little things. I thought that I could probably bring out something of the senior citizen that they really wanted to tell me. Because every one of them had a story inside of them to relate, and I was going to work it out through their dreams, and through their poetry, and through writing, and through building things, and through drawing and painting, and go beyond the artsy-craftsy senior citizens programs set up in seniors centers for funny little old people who have nothing to do with themselves. I thought that would be a good program, so I wrote it all out that way. And nothing happened. I went down there, and there wasn't a soul for the class. Not one senior citizen came. There was no one. [laughter] It was as dead as a mackerel. So that class never manifested into anything. That was the end of that.

I was teaching at that time in the Palos Verdes Community Arts Center. I had students there, around ten

students, faithful students, in assemblage. There was a little bit of tension going on up there among people at that particular moment. I always had to fight to get a class there, because if you didn't have the students, you didn't have the class. I got sort of tired of-- One woman by the name of Pamela French was my faithful getter of the students. Everytime I'd have a class, she'd have to go out and call them all and work at it and get them to come. So I got pretty fed up with that way of teaching, so I decided to try it at Angel's Gate. I said, "Well, there's a big space there and we can work. Why don't we try it and see what happens, see if we can't get something going?" So they all came, the whole group, and they loved it up there. The atmosphere was better, and we had a big, big room where we could really work and do things. The people there were all very cooperative, and it was a community. We had our own gallery going; it was a small gallery at that time. We had different exhibitions by different artists, but in a different way at that time. Honor Kirk was the sort of a director who, you never knew exactly what she was doing. She meant well. She was a painter herself. Finally, the whole thing came to the point where Honor left. She was offered a house in Cambria, so she moved from Portuguese Bend, where she lived, and she turned it over to Bobbie [Roberta M.] Miller, who's the current director. Well,

Bobbie didn't want the job. She was a painter and she just wanted to paint, but she said she would try and see what she could do to help. Everything that Bobbie did, well, people started to be irritated by what she was doing, because she was trying to change things around slowly to make an art center out of it. A lot of the people were very disappointed that were the original group that were working there, because she was saying things to them that could bother them, you know.

SMITH: Bother them personally or bother them over the issues?

WAGNER: Yeah, personally, over the issues.

SMITH: Well, what were the issues that people were arguing about?

WAGNER: Well, they had a lot of problems there because there was a young group that had a different idea of how Angel's Gate should be run than the way Bobbie was running it. They broke off and formed an art association, which to me is death. Any art association, as far as I'm concerned, just the word "art association" is death to me. It's a bad word.

SMITH: By "young group" you mean people in their twenties?

WAGNER: Yeah, that had recently come to Angel's Gate. They knew everything there was to know; they were very arrogant.

SMITH: Art school graduates?

WAGNER: They were college graduates. There were actors and there were actresses and painters and potters and people of that nature. They were doing all sorts of things that Bobbie didn't like, the way they were operating.

SMITH: Like what?

WAGNER: Underground things, underhanded things, behind her back. Talking against her, and that sort of thing. They took it up with the city council in San Pedro. They went to Flores, Joan [Milke] Flores, and created a lot of problems. They convinced Joan Flores that Bobbie wasn't doing a good job. I called up Joan Flores, and I said, "What's the trouble here anyway?"

She said, "Well, Bobbie Miller has got to get her act together. She's too emotional. We're not going to renew your contract on that land unless you get something together up there."

The way it was, the land was leased for three years without paying anything, but it was just the idea they'd give us the land for three more years that belonged to the parks department, the actual land. But Bobbie's smarter than all that, and she's a real fighter. She found out that it didn't belong to the parks department, it actually belongs to the [United States] Department of Interior. So she started working with the Department of Interior and

found out all these things. They said, "No matter what happens, you're going to stay here. You're doing a remarkable job."

SMITH: Well, were there differences over the kinds of classes that should be taught?

WAGNER: No, never anything over classes. No, nothing like that.

SMITH: Differences over the kinds of programs that would be presented?

WAGNER: No, personalities over the theater, for instance. They had live theater, and the actors and the dancers, they created all sorts of ego problems, narcissistic ego problems that occur with dancers and actors. It's just their temperament to do that. If they can't get the money they want or the way they want it, they complain and rebel, and they quit. All these great boring type of people who are not doing that much, you know what I'm talking about? They think they're really important. This center was not based on that sort of personality. It was a place for artists to come and work and have a place to work and teach and help the community. It was built for the community to have classes, free classes, for children and for grownups and for anybody who wanted to come to extend their expression. It wasn't set up on a program to set it up as a commercial theater and organize it in that direction.

This was the way it was going. The board of directors and Bobbie, they all had a fight with this big group, I remember. It was a lot of nasty words thrown around in the meeting. Finally, they all left, they disappeared, that whole group. We got back to normal again, back to where we're going. Currently, we have about fifty-five studios working with artists, dancers, writers, poets, music, and a gallery that is a community gallery. It is not a cultural center gallery, it's a community gallery.

SMITH: What do you mean?

WAGNER: Well, there's a difference. A community gallery is like in a university or-- San Pedro has no other community gallery, it is the only community gallery within that part of town. There isn't any other place, so that gallery is-- It has now built itself up to the point where it's recognized as a community gallery. If you said art association, they will not list you in any newspaper; or a culture center, you will not get a listing in any paper. But if you're a community art gallery, then you're listed. That's for **Art News**, **Art Week** and the [**Los Angeles**] **Times**, or any other paper. Then they cover you. As soon as the words "community gallery" come on it, then you're covered.

SMITH: I don't see what the difference is in terms of the meaning between a cultural center and a community art

gallery.

WAGNER: They have a cultural center, but they have a community art gallery within the cultural center. That is separate. Here is a community gallery, but the art center is all around it--the cultural center. That took time; it took a lot of history to put together slides and backgrounds and clippings to send to these people, to the California Arts Council, to make them realize that we do have an important community gallery and that it's the only community art gallery in the whole south end of Los Angeles. There's no other one. There's college galleries, but there's not another community gallery. So that's very important.

SMITH: You teach classes there still. What are you teaching?

WAGNER: I teach assemblage. It wasn't until, oh, three years ago that they asked me if I would like to have a studio to work in. So they gave me the studio. If you work and teach in the studio, you get it absolutely free.

SMITH: Do you get paid for teaching?

WAGNER: Yeah, that's true, I do. I get paid for teaching and I have a free studio.

SMITH: Are you involved in the decision making at Angel's Gate?

WAGNER: I'm on the board of directors at present; I've

just come on it. I have always been involved in the decision making, because Bobbie always comes to me with what do I think of this? or what should we do about that? Especially on exhibitions and gallery operations, because at one time I was sort of in charge of hanging all the exhibitions and putting them together for Angel's Gate. Paul Bouchard, myself, and Lieve Jerger, who is a Belgian lacemaker, a little blonde over there, and a few others, we kind of took care of that, to curate exhibitions and try to get high-quality work from the very beginning. We never let it go into the amateur state. Then they did have a curator, Penny [Penelope] Cornwall, who was a paid curator, for a while. They had to let her go because the funding wasn't enough for her. Well, now they have no curator, but there are shows coming up where they will be having a curator again. There are several good shows coming up in the future, one with Ed Lau and his group is next. Then there's going to be a photography and poets show, "Poets Who Make Art." There's one coming up in 1988 which will be a California impressionists, abstract impressionists, of the fifties, the forties and fifties, which will be just on Southern California artists. Some of the old ones will be in that show, like Phil Dike and--I guess we'll have to include Millard Sheets. [laughter] Roger [Edward] Kuntz and a lot of the ones who were around for a long time,

[James] Strombotny.

SMITH: Has Angel's Gate done historical shows like that before?

WAGNER: You mean as a retro--

SMITH: Well, not retrospective.

WAGNER: Sort of a documentary of certain periods?

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: No, we've never tried it. It was my idea. I presented it to them. Arnold Schiffrin will be the curator of the exhibition. He knows a lot about gathering things from museums from that period, and he already has practically the whole exhibition together. They want to do a catalog through the Arts Council.

SMITH: Will any of your pieces be in it?

WAGNER: No, I don't think so. I could have them in. They want me to be in it, but I don't think I want to be in it. Maybe. [laughter]

SMITH: You also recently curated a show at Barnsdall [Junior Art Center], the "Toying Around" show. What was the concept behind that?

WAGNER: Well, actually, it was the lady who-- It was very interesting, because Harriet Miller was the one I was working with, she was my director at the Palos Verdes Community Arts Center when I left and took everything to Angel's Gate. I didn't think I'd ever see her again. We

got along all right. She was a nice lady, I guess. I liked her at that time, but she had a lot of strange ideas. She was always nice to me. I will never quite understand how she could be living in a condominium that is on top of the house where I was born in Redondo Beach. So she became the director of the Barnsdall Junior Art Center. When I was asked to teach at Barnsdall Junior Art Center, she was kind of surprised to see me there in the beginning. But I was there one summer, and then a couple of more times, and then she called me one day and said, "Marty Walsch has left the center. Would you curate an exhibition for me called, 'Toying Around'?"

I said, "Well, what do you think we should do?"

"'Toying Around,' we want to do something funny, something really amusing." And she said, "Marty Walsch has some of the artists already, but maybe you could get a few more."

So I called all the artists that she had, and I found out who they were, Dave [David] Quick and Jim [James] Jenkins and some of those people. Then I called up Garner, Phil Garner, and a few of these kind of characters. We put this show together and it was-- I wanted to make it feel like it was a funhouse or a place of joy, like when I was a kid, a penny-arcade-like feeling, with moving kinetic sculpture, and painting the whole place like all skies, and

little doors you walk through, and the walls all cockeyed like an old funhouse. I wanted to give that feeling that you're kind of toying around in there.

SMITH: All assemblages in that show pretty much?

WAGNER: Yeah, they were all three-dimensional art, kinetic and otherwise, static. Some of them were quite humorous, I thought. A lot of humor. It had the largest attendance of any exhibition that they'd ever had at Barnsdall Junior Art Center. They were coming in droves. We got a very good review on it in the **Times**.

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SMITH: Well, we ended last time with **The Interior Castle** [also known as **The Castle of the Seven Dwelling Places**] and some of the boxes, completing the playing cards series and some of the boxes that you did after **The Interior Castle**. What were your next projects in '84, '85, '86?

WAGNER: That's when I started one of my major works, sort of an epic piece.

SMITH: Which is?

WAGNER: It's called **Firaskew**, not knowing what that word means except that it came in my dreams.

SMITH: The sound, the word itself, or the image?

WAGNER: The actual word, just in my dreams. Many different dreams of Firaskew would take me to these lonely places and cities of my inner traveling, night journeys. There was always a sign that pointed the way, either on a beer can or on a marker on the road or on a cliff, an arrow pointed: "Firaskew." I would get there and it always turned into some fantastic city. Sometimes I'd go by train, sometimes I'd go by car, sometimes streetcar, walking, automobiles, through deserts. All sorts of ways I got to Firaskew, different kinds of vehicles.

SMITH: Does the name have any particular meaning?

WAGNER: It has no meaning whatsoever except what it says

on the sign in my dreams. I looked it up and tried to find out a derivation, and there's nothing.

SMITH: No relationship to--

WAGNER: No relationship to anything that I know of, unless it's fear and askew, but that doesn't really make it to me. It's just a word that came. People say, "What does it mean?" Well, it doesn't mean anything.

SMITH: The Firaskew that you've constructed is an amusement park. Is that all there is to Firaskew? Isn't it a larger place than that?

WAGNER: Well, this particular construction of Firaskew not only goes to the dream, but it goes to my childhood, my boyhood, when I was quite involved in and loved the old amusement parks. Even today, if I am anyplace that I see an amusement--not like Magic Mountain or anything, I mean old ones, old roller coasters, old buildings, weathered, along the sea preferably. There's a certain wonderful mystery that happens to piers along the sea, full of goodies like that, mists and fogs, the white iron against the gray sea. There's something beautiful about it. So this actual construction was things that I remembered from my childhood, some of the things that really were outstanding in my mind. I adapted those into the piece. I can always remember walking down the strand when I was a boy of about six or seven years old, Moonstone Beach in

Redondo [Beach]. I used to go down there on Sundays with all the rest of us. We had bottles and we'd fill the bottles up with moonstones and wait for the tourists to come down in the afternoon on the streetcar. In those days it was called the "green cars." The balloon trip went from Los Angeles down through the beaches and over to San Pedro and Long Beach and back up to L.A. again as a loop. We would sell moonstones for five cents apiece to the tourists and make a pretty good day at that. That Moonstone Beach strand that we walked on, I used to love it, right on the sea. You went under the old white structures of the roller coaster, and underneath that was the curio shop. I always looked in the windows, and I loved to see all these things they had, stones and polished gems and chips and models and shells. They always fascinated me when I was a kid. I remember I always was very fascinated by maritime museums, where they had ships and ship parts and models, all of these sort of things of the sea. I thought it would be necessary to have my own maritime museum in the piece. The one thing that I remember very clearly, and I used to laugh because we used to go on it all the time, was the Tunnel of Love, where the swan came down the chute of water, and you went into this-- Usually, if you could find a nice girlfriend to take with you, you might even be brave enough to hold her hand, you know, in these dark chasms. They were

sort of a romantic place. They didn't smell very good, the water was kind of stagnant in there, but you got used to it. It was dark, and the swans were big white swans that were pulled by a conveyor through the water down through the paths. So I incorporated the Tunnel of Love in this piece, starting in one building over there, under the farmer's daughter's card room, and moving around through the whole interior of this Firaskew in chasms where the people are waving at you from time to time as they go by through the maritime museum and down the hall of the curio store.

Another thing that I can remember very deep in my memories was the house of mirrors. People are in there all tangled up in the glass, confused, not knowing which way to go, banging into the walls. Some people were panicking, other people to the point of exhaustion, others were laughing and hoping they'd find the right way out. Up on the roof of the house of mirrors was the laughing girl, who was a woman who sat there all day and went ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. You looked down below, and you saw all these products of what she was laughing at floundering around in this house of mirrors. It was all exposed to the public on the outside so you could see what was there and you could watch them. It was an interesting aquarium of people. So the house of mirrors is the one on the other

side over there. There were always ballrooms for dancing. The place where I used to dance was the Hut in Hermosa [Beach] and the Mandarin Ballroom in Redondo and the Casino Gardens in Ocean Park. All of that. So I have a ballroom up on the penthouse, but I have a ball team in it instead of a dance pavilion.

SMITH: A baseball team.

WAGNER: A ball team, yeah, in the ballroom.

SMITH: Does **Firaskew**-- Since it comes out of dreams, is there a particular message? Is there a dream message that's involved in this construction?

WAGNER: I think the message that I'm trying to convey here is that practically every human being loves the structures of older buildings. There are so many of them that have been removed, it's almost impossible to find any like this. They love the romantic side of it. All these great amusement piers in the country, in Europe, they were all designed like palaces of gaiety and a place for joy and laughter and happiness. They were never built for sadness or morbidity. They knew nothing about electronics or plastics, so everything was sort of created as an art form; the paintings, the buildings, were almost like American folk art.

SMITH: When you were in England, did you go to Brighton Pier?

WAGNER: I loved Brighton Pier.

SMITH: How did it compare to Hermosa, to what you grew up with?

WAGNER: To Redondo?

SMITH: To Redondo, yes.

WAGNER: A different kind of elegance.

SMITH: In what way?

WAGNER: Well, it's very Victorian, the Brighton Pier, elegant. It was all made of steel, the ironwork and the filagree, and not wood, like our piers were. They had steel pilings and ornate curlicued pier railings. It was a different feeling. I remember one time being told that the Brighton Pier, the Palace Pier, it was called-- There were two piers in Brighton, the West Pier and the Palace Pier. The West Pier, when I was visiting there, was closed during the winter, but the Palace was open. So I decided to-- I didn't really want to go on it because I thought it might damage my imagery and all the love I had for piers, and it might destroy some kind of an inner feeling I had for this sort of architecture and this kind of condition. I liked to look at it from a distance, but not get too close to it, because sometimes when one becomes too familiar with something the whole romance is gone. So I went on the pier, but I went for a particular reason. I went to see some boxes that a man built. They were boxes that wound

up, they were kinetic boxes, and if you put in a shilling, it would do things. All sorts of comical boxes. Some of them weren't so comical, really, they were rather morbid, like the guillotine and the swinging blade and the hangman. But there were others that were more humorous. So I decided I'd like to go on this pier to see those at the end. So I took a very long morning and just took my time and built up all sorts of anxieties about it, and I even stopped for coffee. When I finally arrived at the end of the pier, I walked all the way around this end, because it's a huge beautiful facade: archways and columns, white and gray, standing out there against the sea. It was such a strong inner thing coming into me that I just sat down for about half an hour just to absorb it all. All these old piers and all these memories and all these times of my youth all came back through me, sitting on this bench. There was an outside theater on the back of the pier and I sat down. The wind was blowing so cold, I was almost rigid. So I took my time and walked around, and I saw the fortune-tellers, and I saw the cockles and whelks. But they were closed, everything was closed. I went into the pub, and I said, well, this is open, one thing I can-- I sat down and I had a beer. I was sitting there and the gentleman across the way from me told the barmaid, [with British accent] "Give John the Baptist another drink." I

didn't pay much attention, then all of a sudden I realized he was talking about me. "What brings you here today, John?"

I said, "Well, I came out here to look for those boxes that wind up."

He said, "That's too bad, I just put them away for the winter. They're all stored." He had an assistant with him: "That right, mate?" And the assistant bowed and nodded his head. So I missed them. He said, "You come back in the summer, I'll have them."

So I did, I went back in the summer. He told me that some rich collector, lady from New York bought the whole set of them for a million dollars, so I never saw them. But I really never regret going on the Palace Pier, because the imagery was so wonderful. It went right back to my youth. I felt that I was there, walking through the old board walls and the holes in the fences. Those old piers were built-- I was so used to stain boards and, like, stains on the walls, and here they were partially painted, and it was peeling off. One Englishman was sitting on the pier there. I said, "This is a very interesting pier, isn't it?" And he said, "I don't know about that. I think it needs a little paint. Seems to be sort of chipped. I don't know, it's a good pier to fish off of." I figured, well, that kind of a place is for people like me, who love

that particular nostalgia of that moment, and then the rest is for people who like to buy snow cones and whelks and cockles, ride the Dodge 'em cars, get their fortunes told, I suppose. And then there are those kind of people who just like the pier to fish off of. Really, the Redondo Pier was to fish off of, too, so it had both things, a fishing part and an amusement part. The old pier was built like European architecture, you see.

SMITH: In Redondo.

WAGNER: In Redondo. The buildings were-- They weren't built like now, it was all built like the old European architecture. Not like POP; they really cheapened that one, putting in all that sort of Disneyland feeling to it, the Pacific Ocean Park. The original Ocean Park Pier was a great pier, and it had-- I loved it. The Venice Pier was a beautiful pier, there were lots of things going on on the Venice Pier. The funhouse was one of the big events, twenty-five cents all day.

SMITH: In terms of **Firaskew**, have your English drawings, your Under the Crown series, your playing card series, your experiences at Brighton, have they been fed into this at all?

WAGNER: I would say so, in quite a few places. Especially in the railroad station over here. It's like Waterloo Station, or some of the great railway stations in England

where they go forever in both directions, like Waterloo Station, Marylebone, Paddington, they're big stations, King's Cross. This station is very important to me, because I'm a very, very ardent lover of old railroads and the sounds of trains in the night. Although these trains within this piece are back to my squiggle trains again, like through my early boxes of my train dreams. I've incorporated these squiggle trains, the horse-locomotive, inside the railroad station. If you notice, the trains are part horse and part locomotive, some of those images from previous dreams, from the seventies.

A lot of the architecture is, I would say, British, Victorian, in concept without really working at it or trying to make a model of a Victorian building. But the feeling of the towers and the roofs and things, the window details and the wood on the sides and the old planks, it is British in a lot of ways. And also, it is British because I used bricks, you know, minibricks in the railroad stations and up in the details in the buildings, I leave a place for just bricks.

SMITH: Many of the objects are things that you bought or found. When do you decide to build something and when do you decide to use something that you can get at a store?

WAGNER: When I can find something for-- When I'm working with railroads, for instance, I make my own locomotives and

make all of the station parts, all of the platforms and the stairs and all of that. But people, tiny people, they have them in railroad model shops--like the Whistle Stop down here, where you can buy them, little people that fit the gauges of the railways that you want. That's why I might use them in the railroad stations, people waiting for trains.

SMITH: Then you have the Dungeons and Dragons toys that you--

WAGNER: Yeah, those are things I found somewhere. I don't know exactly where I found those, but I found them one day on the street, just thrown away. I thought they would be wonderful to adopt to the corners and towers of old buildings, like figures, you know, like many buildings have sculpture up on the top of them, you know.

SMITH: The windows on the chapel, did you draw those yourself?

WAGNER: Yes. The stained glass windows, yeah, I did those.

SMITH: From your own design, or are they stenciled off of--

WAGNER: They were kind of a composite, a little of each so they would fit into the windows.

SMITH: Then you've also used trompe l'oeil within the piece. Is there a particular function for the trompe-

l'oeil in this?

WAGNER: Yeah, I think so. I enjoy trompe l'oeil, especially here in the church, where you are looking down the aisle of the church on the top of the pool hall. Incidentally, the pool hall has sharks swimming around in the swimming pool. They're the pool sharks. The pool room is above the railroad station, and on top of the pool hall is the church. In the very back of the church, over the altar, there is Mary. But Mary is very deep, and people say they look around the back, there's no Mary, she's not there. It's a nice illusion. She's way over in another tower, above the curio store on the ship that's going down in the whirlpool there. Through the window here, there's a ship going down a whirlpool. Look straight in, straight in this window. I like that idea of making them wonder exactly where it's coming from. Then I have one here in the curio store where you are looking down the hall of the curio store and the swans from the Tunnel of Love are coming at you way down the hall. And the dog in front. Go around and look in the Tunnel of Love, and down that hallway you see a dog. So those kinds of things twisted around a little bit so people wonder what's going on. Then I like to do things like the ship here, on top of the marine museum, actually going through the building from one side to the other with the engine in the room inside.

SMITH: Are there going to be any sequels to Firaskew or additions to it?

WAGNER: It's possible, it's possible. I may do another one one day. When I get the-- I didn't think I'd ever do this one. I started it in San Pedro with one building, the one with the man with the pencil, holding the pencil on the drawing that says, "Draw up a chair." Up above it is a man riding on a rabbit, a cowboy on a rabbit, called "How To Be a Rabbit Puncher." That was the first building, and I didn't think maybe I would ever get to doing another one of these things. Then I made a sketch one day, and I got it and said, "This is going to take me a long time to do this thing." So I just started and took my time, and I built one building at a time. I had a general idea how it was all going together from the concept of the drawing, just to sketch it, but I didn't know when or how it would go together exactly, just the ideas and picking out a few things, like railroad stations, squiggle trains, the marine museum, the curio store, the hall of mirrors, and that sort of thing. To get the feeling that I had when I used-- These are all symbols of what I remember on the pier when I was a boy. A lot of the fantasy that appears here is also coming out of the dream.

SMITH: Again, the miniaturization is very important to the effect. Could you make this larger? A very common thing

now is the building of environments, so one could imagine this being built on a larger scale that people could go into it.

WAGNER: I could build these things as high as the high rises downtown, if you wanted them built that way. They could take these things and make huge cities out of them. Sure, it could be done. Full-size locomotives, full-size boats, people walking all along the pier; it wouldn't be any problem. I wouldn't want to do it, but if somebody wanted to build it, it would be a wonderful project.

SMITH: So if you could build something that people could move into, an environmental thing, you would do that, then.

WAGNER: Yeah, sure.

SMITH: When you do a piece like this, a construction like this, it raises the question, what is it for? In the sense that when you do your assemblages and your boxes, they can go to galleries and they get sold, they hang in somebody's house or they hang in a museum. What happens with a piece like this? Is there a market for a piece like this?

WAGNER: I have no idea. I had never thought about it. But I'm sure that if some museum wanted to buy it, they could make a nice space for it and put it in a glass case where you could walk around it. It could be done just as easily as showing something else.

SMITH: But if you put it in a glass case, you would miss

three-quarters of the effects, wouldn't you?

WAGNER: I don't think so, not if it was close. I think you could still catch most of it. I think so. But I never worried about what to do with it. Because I never think about any of that; I never built anything for what's going to happen to it. My whole philosophy is I build things for the joy and love of what's happening at that moment. What happens afterward I'm detached from. What's going to happen to anything? What's going to happen to **The Interior Castle**? What's going to happen to my playing card castle [**The Suite of Pluses**]? They're not commercial ventures, you know. They're not like prints or paintings.

SMITH: In an earlier interview with you that was done in the newspaper, you make a distinction between collective dreams and archetypal dreams. I was wondering if you could-- Do you remember that? That was in the sixties, in a newspaper in Oregon. Do you remember making that distinction?

WAGNER: Well, actually, I think what I'm saying is that archetypal dreams are things that are related directly to me in my own direction and what I'm up to right now. It's giving me a message through the labyrinths of where I am in my work. I use a lot of archetypal images throughout all of my work.

SMITH: What do you mean by archetypal?

WAGNER: Well, repetition. A roller coaster is an archetypal symbol. My trains are archetypal symbols. My walls and textures of buildings and my arches and checkerboards, all those things are my archetypal symbols. But if I see a bunch of people standing on the back of a Mack Bulldog truck wondering where to go, or being unloaded off a ship with a lot of cows, or a lot of people involved in a dream that I don't even--that doesn't even belong to me, I'm sure, I call that collective dreaming. It's not part of my archetypal images at all. It has nothing to do with me. It's like a newsreel. I'm looking at somebody else's dream. I belong to the Society for the Restoration of Lost Dreams, where we're allowed to buy, sell, lease, mail back to people, dreams. Or we can collect dreams, like lucid dreams, archetypal dreams, collective dreams, wet dreams, any kind of dreams. We can buy and sell those dreams, or we can just mail them off. I'm a P.H.D., Professional Head Dreamer, in the Society for the Restoration of Lost Dreams. Lukman Glasgow, he's actually the executive administrator. D. Ream is the president. The last big meeting we had was about ten years ago in Eagle Rock, under the rock. We had the society of lost dreams, and Kenneth [J.] Atchity-- A whole lot of us belong to the organization. Our secretary was a big chimpanzee, who was typing the whole time at the table.

[laughter] So when I say "collective dreams," I always feel they don't belong to me, in my way of putting them.

SMITH: How do they get into your head? Is it from watching television or what?

WAGNER: How it got there?

SMITH: Yeah, how it got there.

WAGNER: I have no idea. A lot of my dreams are like watching television or watching the news or something. They're cut, sharp, direct dreams that come right through to me with a story or a visual approach that I can use in my work, you know.

SMITH: Could you tell me about your involvement with **Dreamworks** periodical?

WAGNER: The magazine?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Well, it started in 1978 with Kenneth Atchity at Occidental College and Marsha Kinder, USC [University of Southern California] now.

SMITH: She was at Occidental.

WAGNER: I had known these people through the **California Quarterly**, which was a poetry magazine that came out that Atchity was the editor of. He'd use some of my works in there, poems and pictures of boxes and things. So Marsha called me up and said they were going to do a dream journal, and she wondered if I would be interested in

submitting some dreams. So she came over to my house in Silver Lake, and I read her about five dreams. She said, "That's all I need to know. Let's take them all right now." So that's when it started. My dreams were published; the first dreams that were published were the railroad dreams, my squiggle train dream. Then I became a member of the advisory board and still am a member.

SMITH: Do you attend meetings?

WAGNER: There isn't any meeting.

SMITH: Do they submit material for you to review?

WAGNER: Yeah, I do too. If I find someone that I really want to submit, that I like their dreams or whatever they're doing, well, I send it to either Ken Atchity or to Marsha Kinder.

The last one I sent in was a dream called the "Laughing Girl," with a drawing from a Mexican series in the cemetery from one of my nightmares. Well, I got a letter from Ken Atchity saying that he wanted to publish it, but he thought he would need a commentary on the dream, because how could I write-- He would like to know the dream rather than how I created the story around the dream. So I wrote back to him and said that I didn't create the story around the dream, it was actual recall. All I did was get up in the morning and write down exactly what happened in the dream without any altering of the dream. Well, while

I'm calling him, writing him that letter, I get another letter from Marsha Kinder at USC saying she wanted to publish the "Laughing Girl" at the same time in Dreamworks, so both of them grabbed it. It was passed on to her, apparently. And I said, "Yeah, but they want a commentary."

She said, "Gordon, you don't need a commentary. When you write dreams, they're direct experiences, there's no reason for you to have a commentary."

Well, I did write a commentary, and the commentary's a very good one. But it had to do with-- After I had the dream, then I went back and wrote the commentary related to the different archetypal images, again, that had appeared in my life to make that dream possible, you see. Roller coasters and the penny arcade and the house of mirrors and the celluloid windmills and all those things that I--and death, they were all there, my life was all in that dream. So that's what I mean by a pure dream that ties together where you are; it's not about some remote people over here that could be in somebody else's dream.

SMITH: Do archetypal dreams have a religious connotation?

WAGNER: Most of mine don't. No, I don't think so. Well, I imagine if you were a good psychologist, you could probably make one out of it, but I can't. A lot of my dreams are to defeat--were actually defeating my fear of

death, you know. They were helping me to destroy that fear. Through those dreams, and then those dreams were actually manifested. By doing that I got rid of that fear.

SMITH: I wanted to ask you a very broad question, which is, do you feel there's an artists' community in Southern California?

WAGNER: Well, if you call-- How many square miles is Los Angeles?

SMITH: Five hundred, or thereabouts, more or less.

WAGNER: Well, if it's classified as five hundred square miles, there's an artists' community, yeah, because everybody is so far apart, you know. There's communities in each town; like there's a community in San Pedro, there's a community in Pasadena, there's one in Santa Monica, Venice. But these communities very seldom ever see each other unless it's in an exhibition together. You never know what the other artist is doing. Our city is not built for Sohos and places of that nature, where all the artists hang out. In fact, I think it would be very difficult to establish an artists community in Los Angeles at the present time, due to the fact that wherever artists go and get set up as a community, the land developers move in, triple their rent and kick them out. What they've already done, they improve a little bit more and raise their rents up. Artists really don't have much chance in

city at all of ever finding a community. It's very difficult for an artist to live here. I don't know how they do it. I don't know how half of them can afford these expensive lofts, unless they've got some sort of a stipend somewhere and still work as artists. Unless they just have that and do other work, do things on weekends, teaching and things of that nature. I wish we did have an artists' community. I wish we could find one where we could have a whole complex instead of senior citizens' complexes, an artists' complex, like in New York, in Westbeth, where you pay according to your income, that's the way the rentals go. If they had that sort of thing here, I would certainly be one of the first to belong to their organization. And, you know, a central meeting place. Angel's Gate has that sort of thing in San Pedro.

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